DOCTORAL THESIS

What can art tell us about the cult of the Virgin Mary in the early Roman Church? A re-evaluation of the evidence for Marian images in Late Antiquity

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Introduction

For over 1500 years the image of one woman has commanded the hearts and minds of millions of Christians around the world. The woman is Mary the mother of Jesus and her face has become one of the most powerful female portraits in the history of art. A depiction of her holding the child Jesus in her arms is immediately recognisable even to non-Christians, signifying both a charming family scene and one of Christianity's core dogmas - the incarnation of Christ.

This apparently maternal image of Mary is said to have its roots in the very beginnings of the Christian Church in Rome. Indeed, the oldest image of Mary so far identified and dated to the early part of the third century, shows a seated woman with a baby at her breast. This fresco, hidden in a remote corner of the catacomb of Priscilla, is one of a handful of wall paintings from the catacombs that are said to feature Mary with the child Jesus. When these frescoes were re-discovered in the sixteenth century they were regarded as clear visual evidence that the early Christian communities in Rome not only venerated Mary in her role as mother of Christ, but that they had already developed a clear idea of her imagery. Four hundred years later this idea still forms an integral part of all scholarship on the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Yet I believe the visual evidence from

the catacombs has been misread leaving us with an entirely inaccurate picture of Mary's role within the early Roman Church.

Deconstructing this erroneous evidence and looking with fresh eyes at how the visual image of Mary may have first evolved will, I believe, provide vital new insights into the development of the Roman Church and the role that women once played within its hierarchy.

It has been helpful to my research that over the last decade a substantial amount of scholarly attention has focussed on discovering how and when the cult of Mary first began to blossom in late antiquity.[1] In the process some of the assumptions previously made about Mary's role in the doctrines of the early Church have begun to be challenged.[2]

Although most scholars engaged in this research agree that there is little hard evidence of a cult of Mary before the late fourth century, they are still divided as to the extent of her veneration within the early Church. Textual evidence such as the *Protevangelium* or *Infancy Gospel of James*, which provides a detailed description of Mary's life from her own miraculous conception through to the virgin birth of Jesus, is generally dated to as early as the second century, but the text cannot be

[1] The *Oxford Centre for Late Antiquity* defines this period as stretching from 250-750AD. For the purposes of this thesis I have confined my research to between 250-600AD. Unless otherwise stated all dates included in this thesis should be read as AD.

[2] For some of the latest theories see the essays in Maunder, C., (ed.) (2008) *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*; Vassilaki, M., (ed.) (2005) *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*; Swanson, R.N., (ed.) (2004) *The Church and Mary*, (*Studies in Church History 39*); Vassilaki, M., (ed.) (2000) *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art.* See also Miri Rubin's recently published study of the history of the Virgin Mary. Rubin, M., (2009) *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary.*

linked with any evidence of contemporary Marian cults.[3] She is mentioned in the writings of early theologians such as Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian and yet it is not until the fifth century that specific Marian feast days and formal devotions are documented.[4]

The *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, the earliest prayer addressed to Mary as *Theotokos*, has been dated to as early as the third and as late as the fourth centuries.[5] Leena Mari Peltomaa has presented compelling evidence for the re-dating of the *Akathistos hymn* from the seventh to the fifth century, while Stephen Shoemaker has revisited the early Dormition narratives which he locates in the late fourth century.[6] All this evidence suggests that the figure of Mary may indeed have been the object of veneration from as early as the time of the *Protevangelium*. Other scholars read the textual evidence in a different way and see Mary's importance to the early Church solely in terms of a Christological context. They suggest that her elevation to the role of Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus was instigated in order to ensure that Jesus' own divinity would be emphasised.[7]

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[3] For the most recent translation and analysis of this text see Elliott, J.K., (2005) *The Apocryphal New Testament*: *A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* , 46-68.
[4] Gambero, L., (1999) *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 20 and 97.
[5] See McGuckin, J.A., (2008) 'The Early Cult of Mary and Inter-Religious Contexts in the Fifth Century Church' in Maunder C., (ed.) 1-22, and Price, R. M., (2004), 'Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy' in Swanson, R.N., (ed.), 31-39.
[6] Peltomaa, L. M., (2001) *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*; Shoemaker, S., (2008), 'The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at Some Old and New Sources.' in Maunder, 71-89; Shoemaker, S., (2002), *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption.*
[7] See McGuckin, J. A. (1994), *St Cyril of Alexandria: the Christological Controversy, its History, Theology, and Texts*; Norris, R. A. (1980), *The Christological Controversy*; Semmelroth, O., (1964) *Mary Archetype of the Church*; Price, R., (2004), 'Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy', in Swanson, 3–8; Wright, D. F., (2004), 'From "God-Bearer" to "Mother of God" in the Later Fathers', in Swanson, 22–30; Cameron. A., (2004|), 'The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making', in Swanson, 1–21; Price, R., (2008), 'The Theotokos and the Council of Ephesus' in Maunder, 89-105.

Yet although textual references are being minutely scrutinized both by theologians and historians engaged in this search for Mary's origins, the visual evidence provided by the art of the first Christian communities has received little, if any, attention. The study of Christian art is invariably left to art historians, but if scholars from other disciplines do use it as evidence it is rarely without the safety net of contemporary texts.[8] For the historian used to working with texts it is hard to regard pictorial art as a stand alone primary source and view it without recourse to the written word. Yet if interpreted correctly an authentic image can be one of the purest and most insightful windows into an earlier era.[9]

Indeed, the feminist theologian Margaret Miles has long emphasised the importance of visual images and in a recent paper on feminist histories of religious traditions, she commented that:

> *A populist history requires that the artistic and musical resources accessible to whole communities must be considered primary evidence (not illustration) of 'Christian thought'.*[10]

[8] This attitude towards using art as a primary source has its roots in the writings of Erwin Panofsky who formed part of the Hamburg circle of art historians active in the 1930s. Although he identified pictorial images as cultural symbols and pioneered the study of iconography, he also advocated using texts to help identify the subject and meaning of a given image. Panofsky, E., (1939), *Studies in Iconology*.

[9] For a more positive view on the importance of visual images in the study of the early Christian period see Murray, M.C., (2007) 'The Emergence of Christian Art' and Jensen, R.M., (2007) 'Early Christian Images and Exegesis' in Spier, J., (ed.) *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 51-87. Paul Zanker's 1988 work on the power of images in Augustan Rome provided a welcome boost to the importance of art and architecture as 'mirrors of a society'. Zanker, P., (1990) (trans. Shapiro, A.,) *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Other studies on the uses of images as historical evidence include Brilliant R., (1984) *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*; Freedberg, D., (1989) *The Power of Images*; Haskell, F., (1993*) History and Its Images*; Gombrich, E., (1999) *The Uses of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication*; Burke, P., (2001) *Eyewitnessing: The Use of Images as Historical Evidence.*

[10] Miles, M.R., (2006) 'Mapping Feminist Histories of Religious Traditions' *JFSR* 22.1, 45-52; Miles, M.R., (1985) *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture.*

While Thomas F. Mathews, in *The Clash of Gods*: *A reinterpretation of early Christian art*, states plainly that 'one cannot write history without dealing with the history of images…'.[11] These assertions are as true of Marian studies as of any other aspect of early Christian scholarship and it is my contention that Marian scholarship has been especially badly served by a misreading of early images.[12]

I believe that this misreading has its roots in the Counter Reformation period when Catholic scholars first started to study the newly uncovered art of the Roman catacombs.[13] Unfortunately, throughout the last four centuries few scholars have ever challenged these interpretations, a situation I consider in Chapters One and Two. This flawed methodology continues to be reinforced even within the much lauded *International Early Mariology Project*, launched in 2005 with a brief to compile the first accurate database of all Marian texts before the Council of Chalcedon.[14] Although the project maintains it is keen to produce a comprehensive and balanced picture of the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary, it still uses a sketch of the fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla as its logo, captioning it 'the earliest image of Mary'. I provide evidence in Chapter Two that such identification is far from certain.

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[11] Mathews, T.F., (1999) *The Clash of Gods*: *A reinterpretation of early Christian art*, 11.
[12] Still regarded as the most comprehensive study of early Marian iconography is Wellen, G.A., (1961) *Theotokos. Eine Ikonographische Abhandlung uber das Gottesmutterbild in fruhchristlicher.*
[13] The term *Counter-Reformation* denotes the period of Catholic revival in southern Europe that spans from the reign of Pope Pius IV in 1560 through to the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648.
[14] The *International Early Mariology Project* is a joint initiative between Dr. Leena Mari Peltomaa, *Institut für Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik* of the Universität Wien, and Professor Pauline Allen, Director of the Centre for Early Christian Studies at the Australian Catholic University. The Project's long-term aim is to produce 'the first compendium of all reliably dated Greek, Latin and Syriac texts containing references to Mary up to the Council of Chalcedon'. http://www.cecs.acu.edu.au/mariologyproject.htm accessed 12/2/2007.

In fairness not all scholars have been quite so accepting: in 1969 André Grabar in his seminal work *Christian Iconography – a Study of Its Origins* was far more circumspect. He chose instead to use the term 'unidentified scene' when captioning two of the so-called Marian catacomb images. When referring to a third image, previously identified as Mary, he asked his readers to stop and consider – 'Is this really the Virgin Mary, or is this some Christian woman with her child?'[15] Forty years later Grabar's question has still not been answered and no extra evidence has been presented to confirm that these images were ever intended to represent Mary and Jesus. It is hard to believe that any historian would be comfortable making such an assumption based on fragmentary and unsubstantiated textual evidence.

Indeed it is not just Marian art that has been poorly served in this regard and many scholars have started to question the traditional methodology used within the disciplines of Christian art history and archaeology. In 1985 theologian Graydon Snyder became one of the first scholars to challenge received wisdom on Church life before Constantine in *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*.[16] In 1993 Thomas Mathews went on in *The Clash of Gods* to contest the work of some of the leading European scholars of the pre-War period.[17] This was followed in 1994 by Paul Corby Finney's re-examination of the development of Christian art before the late third century. Then in 1996 the church historian William Frend, published his revealing history of the development of Christian archaeology.[18]

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[15] Grabar, A., (1969) *Christian Iconography – A Study of Its Origins*, 9.
[16] He revised and updated his book in 2003. Snyder, G.F., (2003) *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine.*
[17] Mathews, T.F., (1993). The revised edition of the book published in 1999 with some corrections, continues in the same theme but includes a chapter on the development of the Icon.
[18] Finney, P.C. (1994) *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*; Frend, W.H.C., (1996) *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History.*

Of course, the thorny issue of religious images has always provoked controversy. Throughout history Christians themselves rarely agreed about the use of art as a means of illustrating their religious beliefs. The Iconoclastic controversy in the eastern empire, which raged from between 726 to 842, produced a considerable amount of writings about the interpretations of religious art from both the Iconoclasts and Iconophiles.[19] The issues discussed during this period were revived once again during the Reformation. Protestant reformers including Andreas Bodenstein von Carolstatt, Huldreich Zwingli and inevitably John Calvin, led the move to reject the existence of any early Christian art at least for the first 500 years of the Christian era.[20]

The rediscovery of the catacombs in the sixteenth century threw some of these ideas into disarray although several German scholars revived them in the early twentieth century. The basic premise of their ideas was that the early Christian Church was hostile to images until at least the fourth century. They only changed this point of view due to pressure from the uneducated laity who had been used to the pagan tradition of images and effigies and demanded that the Church adopt a pictorial tradition. This idea was continued by some of the leading art historians of the mid twentieth century including Ernst Kitzinger, André Grabar and Wolfgang Fritz Volbach.[21]

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[19] Ibid, chapter 5 for a variety of text extracts from this period. For an updated overview on the period of Iconoclasm see Barber, C., (2002) *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm.*

[20] Lindberg, C., (ed.) (1999) *European Reformations Sourcebook*. Studies on Marian art during the Reformation can be found in: Eire, C.M.N., (1989) *War Against the Idols: Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*; Dillenberger, J., (1999) *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-century Europe*; Kreitzer, B., (2004) *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century*; Duffy, E., (2005) *The Stripping of the Altars: Tradition Religion in England*, 1400-1580.

[21] See Finney, P.C., (1994), 3-14 for a detailed history on the development of these ideas. For an extensive list of the major authors and publications on the history of Christian art from sixteenth

A voice in the wilderness was Sister Mary Charles Murray whose paper entitled *Art and the Early Church* written in 1977 marked a change in the idea that the early Church was hostile to art.[22] She followed this with another publication in 1981 in which she emphasised the strong link between pagan imagery and early Christian funerary art.[23] Some of the more traditional art historians challenged Murray's ideas, while other scholars like Snyder and Miles embraced this way of thinking.[24]

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a growth of research in the field of early Christian art amongst a variety of European and American scholars from different disciplines.[25] This change of direction coincided with the re-printing of some of the older more traditional books on the subject.[26] During this period, scholars also began to look again at Murray's ideas of transmutation from pagan to Christian art. Mathews led the field with his first edition of *The Clash of Gods* followed by art historian Jaś Elsner who presented some important work on the transition from pagan Greco Roman art, whilst Hans Belting's German work on the history of the image before the era of art was translated into English.[27]

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through to the twentieth century see Koch, G., (1996) (trans. Bowden, J.,) *Early Christian Art and Architecture,* 9 -13.

[22] Murray, M.C., (1977a) 'Art and the Early Church', *JTS*, (N.S. XXVIII), 303-45.

[23] Murray, M.C., (1981) *Rebirth and Afterlife. A Study of the transmutation of some pagan imagery in early Christian funerary art*.

[24] Snyder, G., (1985) and (2003); Miles, M.R., (1985).

[25]Belting, H., (1995) (trans. Jephcott. E.,) *Likeness & Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*; Krautheimer, R.,(1980) *Rome Profile of a City 312-1308*; Krautheimer, (1986) *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*; Koch, G., (1996); Milburn, R., (1988) *Early Christian Art & Architecture*.

[26] Beckwith, J., (1970) *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (reprinted in 1992).

[27] Mathews (1993); Elsner, J., (1995) *Art and the Roman Viewer; the transformation of art from the pagan world to Christianity*; Elsner, (1998) *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph. The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450;* Belting, H., (1995).

As the largest body of early Christian art was discovered in Rome, it is understandable that Italian scholars would dominate this field of research. The birth of what became known as the *Roman School* of early Christian archaeology can be dated to the posthumous publication of Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea* in 1632.[28] Giuseppe Marchi and Giovanni De Rossi developed his pioneering work in the nineteenth century and various Papal commissions in turn supported them.[29] The works of Bosio, Marchi and Rossi still form an important part of the scholarship as do the writings of subsequent generations of scholars who trained under the auspices of the *Roman School*. The most famous of these were Mariano Armellini, Henry Stevenson and Orazio Marucchi alongside the Jesuit archaeologists Padres Raffaele Garrucci and Joseph Wilpert. I look at the methodology used by the *Roman School* in Chapter Two.

Rossi's work was brought to an English speaking audience thanks to the writings of two Roman Catholic converts, the Reverends James Spencer Northcote and William R. Brownlow.[30] Outside of the *Roman School*, English and French scholars had also looked at the meaning behind the art found within the catacombs.[31] The English Catholic revival in the 1840s brought with it a rather romantic view of the

[28] Bosio, A., (1632) *Roma Sotterranea*, opera postuma di A. Bosio, compita disposta, ed acccrescuita da G. Severani da S. Severino.
[29] Snyder (2003), 6.
[30] Northcote, J.S., Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma Sotterranea* Vols. 1 & 2.
[31] In the mid nineteenth century a number of important studies were published in France and England: D'Agincourt, S., (1823) *Histoire de l'Art par les monuments*; Jameson, A., (1848) *Sacred and Legendary Art;* Maitland, C., (1846) *The Church in the Catacombs. A Description of the Primitive Church of Rome illustrated by its Sepulchral Remains*; Appell, J.W., (1872) *Monuments of Early Christian Art and Catacomb Painting*. See also Stevenson, J. (1978) *The Catacombs. Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity* for an overview on the scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century and Nicolai, V.F; Bisconti, F., & Mazzoleni, D., (2002) (trans. Stella, C.C., Touchette, L.) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome,* 130–141, for the most recent scholarship.

catacombs thanks in part to Cardinal Wiseman's novel *Fabiola: The Church of the Catacombs* and Cardinal Newman's *Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century*.[32]

In 1955 a previously unknown catacomb under the Via Latina in Rome was uncovered complete with a well-preserved collection of Jewish, Christian and pagan wall paintings. Many of the frescoes displayed entirely new artistic themes and this led some scholars to reconsider their earlier interpretations of Christian images within catacomb art.[33] I shall be undertaking a similar re-assessment when I consider the iconography of the Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi scenes in Chapters Three and Four. More recent analyses of the catacomb images have been published by the likes of Leonard Rutgers, a Dutch historian who produced some groundbreaking work on early Jewish burials within the catacombs, the American theologian Robin Margaret Jensen, and the English art historian John Lowden.[34] These studies have concentrated primarily on the fresco wall paintings, inscriptions and relief sculpture on sarcophagi, all produced in a funerary context. Some also included a perfunctory consideration of non-funerary items such as terracotta lamps and vessels, jewellery, coins and gold glass. I consider the evidence from gold glass in Chapter Six.[35] Although these scholars have not looked specifically at Marian art

[32] Wiseman, N., (1854) *Fabiola: The Church of the Catacombs*; Newman, J.H., (1855) *Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century.*

[33] Tronzo, W., (1986) *The Via Latina Catacomb. Imitation and Discontinuity in Fourth-Century Roman Painting*; Ferrua, A., (1991) *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art.*

[34] Rutgers, L.V., (1995) *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome: Evidence of Cultural Interaction in the Roman Diaspora*; Rutgers, L.V. (2000) Subterranean *Rome*; Jensen, R.M., (2000) *Understanding Early Christian Art*; Lowden, J., (1997) *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*.

[35] Terracotta lamps form an important part of Finney's work. Finney (1994). However, gold glass is still a relatively unstudied topic. The examples discovered in the catacombs are usually small roundels of glass engraved with gold images and inscriptions. Although there is some debate as to their original usage, the consensus is that these roundels formed part of what were once larger glass vessels. The largest collection of this type of gold glass is preserved in the Museo della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. See Morey, C.R., (Ferrari, G., ed.) (1959) *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library. With additional catalogues of other gold-glass collections.*

they have broken down some of the barriers that since the sixteenth century have precluded any challenge to identifications of Marian imagery.

Re-evaluating some of the evidence for the Counter-Reformation idea as to what images represented Mary forms only part of this thesis. Understanding whether or not the early Christians chose to incorporate Mary into their art is an integral part of my research, as is Christianity's relationship with the Roman society and culture in which it developed. Important sources for this work have been provided by Averil Cameron's work on the history of the later Roman empire; Stephen Benko's study on the interaction between the pagans and Christians of Rome; Ramsay McMullen's view of Christianity and paganism between the fourth and eight centuries and more recently Dominic Janes and the relationship between the Romans and Christians, a subject also tackled by Robert Wilken. The Hellenistic influence in late antiquity has great relevance to the artistic styles of the time and this has been thoroughly researched by Glen Warren Bowersock.[36] However, it was the emergence in 1987 of Peter Lampe's masterful study of the first two centuries of Christianity in Rome and its long awaited translation into English in 2003 that first started to focus attention on the divisions within the Christian communities in Rome.[37] His idea of social 'fractionation' with the Christian groups was further developed by Allen Brent in his study on the life and works of the third century presbyter Hippolytus, published in 1995. Although not an art historian, Brent turned to art for his primary source in his re-analysis of the evidence for the existence and writings of Hippolytus, prompting Elsner to present his hypothesis on rival Christian sects

[36] Benko, S., (1986) *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*; Wilken, R.L., (1984) *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them;* Bowersock, G.W. (1990) *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*; Cameron, A., (1993) *The Later Roman Empire*; McMullen, R., (1997) *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*; Janes, D., (2002) *Romans and Christians.*

[37] Lampe (2003), *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries.*

using art as a propaganda tool. I explore this theory along with its implications for the development of Marian iconography in Chapters Four and Five.[38]

Returning more specifically to the subject of the birth of the cult of Mary, in 1993 Stephen Benko produced the most definitive analysis of the pagan and Christian roots of Mariology. This work was republished in 2004, and still forms a key point of reference in the development of Marian devotion in the early Church.[39] The link between Mary and pagan goddess worship was first suggested during the Reformation period and formed an integral part of the Protestant condemnation of the Roman Church. This negative view began to change during the nineteenth century, which saw the first references to the idea of the 'sacred feminine'.[40]

Interest in the importance of the role of the feminine in religion and history evolved throughout the Enlightenment period.[41] Christianity was not entirely separated from the growing need to restore the feminine, as can be seen by the development of the *The Woman's Bible*. This specially edited version of the Bible written by the nineteenth century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the earliest attempts to reassess the role of women in the Old and New Testaments.[42]

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[38] Brent, A., (1995) *Hippolytus and the Roman church in the third centuy: communities in tension before the emergence of a monarch-bishop*; Elsner, J., (2003) 'Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art' in *JRS*, Vol. 93, 114-128.
[39] Benko, S., (1993) *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*.
[40] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduced the concept in his version of *Faust* when he wrote of mysterious and otherwise-unknown beings called *'*The Mothers*',* whose power Mephistopheles acknowledged to be far greater than his own. Goethe concluded *Faust* by announcing *Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.* 'The Eternal Feminine draws us on'. *Faust*, Act V final line. http://www.einam.com/faust/index.html accessed 19/12/2009.
[41] Some groups even declared the imminent appearance of a female Messiah. Moses C.G., (1982) 'Saint-Simonian Men/Saint-Simonian Women: The Transformation of Feminist Thought in 1830s' France' *JMH*, Vol. 54, No. 2, 240-267.
[42] Stanton, E. C., (1993) *The Woman's Bible*.

During this time some scholars started to link the artistic depictions of Mary and Jesus with those of the Egyptian gods Isis and Horus. Authors such as Anna Jameson in her *Legends of the Madonna* and the renowned Egyptologist Ernest A. Wallis Budge, in his *History of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, pursued this line of thought.[43] Modern Egyptologists now regard much of Budge's research with some reservation, but in the early twentieth century his writings were highly influential. The anthropologist James Frazer used many of Budge's theories in his ground breaking anthropological study *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1922.[44] By the 1960s Europe and America were experiencing a full-scale neo-pagan revival and celebrated authors such as Robert Graves were helping to popularise Frazer's research.[45]

These ideas soon broadened to include the concept of matriarchal societies, pre-historic communities ruled by women with men as their subordinates. The book *When God was a Woman* written by Merlin Stone was, to quote its cover line: 'The landmark exploration of the ancient worship of the Great Goddess and the eventual suppression of women's rites'.[46] Although the book was generally rejected by the academic world when first published, it still inspired a wave of new research into the subject.[47]

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[43] Jameson, A., (1890) *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Art;*
Wallis Budge, E.A., (ed.) (1976), *The history of the Blessed Virgin Mary and The history of the likeness of Christ which the Jews of Tiberias made to mock at. The Syriac texts.*
[44] Frazer, J.G., (1922) *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.*
[45] Graves, R., (1977) *The White Goddess.*
[46] Stone, M., (1976) *When God was a Woman.*
[47] Books that followed on included Eisler, R., (1988) *The Chalice and the Blade*: *Our History, Our Future*; Gimbutas, M., (1974) *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500BC.*
For a deconstruction of this view see Eller, C., (2000) *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory.*

In 1977 the Marian and Arthurian scholar Geoffrey Ashe published his own pro-feminist theories on the origins of Marian worship in his book entitled simply *The Virgin*.[48] A year earlier the feminist journalist Marina Warner had been rather more damning in her critique of the myth and cult of Mary. In *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin* she suggested that the symbolism of Mary was firmly linked to an outdated patriarchal culture.[49]

By the early 1990s feminist authors such as Anne Baring and Jules Cashford were producing definitive studies of the evolution of the goddess from the pre-historic period right through to Christianity.[50] A detailed exploration of the theories of the 'goddess movement' is beyond the scope of this thesis, but its effect on the interpretation and identification of early Marian images was significant. In that context I refer to its influence in Chapter Seven when I look at Mary and the goddess myth. In the same chapter I also look in more detail at the role of the allegorical figures known as Personifications and argue that their influence on the development of Marian art was especially significant.

The issue of celibacy within the emergent Church, the involvement of church leaders in the control of the 'brides of Christ' and the veneration of the martyred saints are explored in some detail in Chapters Six and Eight. These ideas are closely linked with developing persona of Mary as the virgin 'par excellence'. Christian asceticism is a subject that has inspired authors from a variety of

[48] Ashe, G., (1977) *The Virgin*.
[49] Warner, M., (1976) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*.
[50] Baring, A., & Cashford, J., (1993) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*; Christ, C.P., (1998) *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality;* Ruether, R., (2005) *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*.

disciplines following on from the groundbreaking works of Susanna Elm and Peter Brown whose studies of asceticism in the early Church still lead the field.[51]

Also in Chapter Eight, I consider the influence of the man who is often credited as being the 'father of western Mariology'. Ambrose was Bishop of Milan in the fourth century and a hugely influential figure in the emerging western Church. Neil McLynn insightful analysis of the man, first published in 1994, is still the most thorough overview of his life and influence.[52] Ambrose was the first Church Father to describe Mary as a 'type of the Church', and the symbolic figure of *Ecclesia* begins to appear in art from around the fourth century.[53] The earliest examples of *Ecclesiae* figures can be found in the Roman church of Santa Sabina. Here the mysterious mosaic figures of *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex gentibus* lead me to consider the controversial theories of Margaret Miles who contends that the nearby church of Santa Maria Maggiore was originally decorated with a blatant message of anti-Jewishness.[54]

Chapter Nine is devoted to the mosaics of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, reputedly the first church to be dedicated to Mary in Rome. As well as considering Miles' anti-Jewish theories, I also undertake a deconstruction of the current scholarship on the church's mosaic cycle, in particular the controversial findings of Suzanne Spain. Spain turned the traditional interpretations of the church's mosaic

[51] Brown, P., (1988) *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*; Elm, S., (1994) *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*; Clark, G., (1995) 'Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Gender and Status', in Wimbush, V.L., & Valantasis R., (eds.) *The Ascetic Dimension in Religious Life and Culture*; Castelli, E., (1986) 'Virginity and its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity,' *JFSR* 2.1, 61–88.
[52] McLynn, N., (1994) *Ambrose of Milan Church and Court in a Christian Capital,*
[53] Graef, H., (1985) *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 77-89.
[54] Miles, M.R., (1993) 'Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews', *HTR*, Vol. 86, 155-175.

cycle on its head in the 1970s and 80s, when she claimed the figure previously recognised as Mary had originally been intended to represent the Old Testament figure of Sarah.[55]

In the final chapter of this thesis I compare the bridal imagery from the nave and triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore with the depictions of virgin martyrs from churches in Ravenna and Poreč. My brief study of the mosaics from the sixth century Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč in Croatia, was made possible thanks to the recently published two part survey of the work by Anne Terry and Henry Maguire.[56] Following the trail of the virgin martyr brides takes me finally to one of the earliest images that can be identified as Mary. In contrast to the glittering virgin martyrs Mary appears veiled and draped in heavy sombre robes, a look that will become inextricably linked with her future imagery. My conclusions as to the messages being conveyed by the artist's choice of dress for Mary will form the final part of this thesis.

[55] Spain, S., (1977) 'Carolingian Restorations of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome', *Gesta*, XVI, 13-22; (1979) 'The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore', *AB*, 61, 518-40: (1983) 'The Restorations of the Sta. Maria Maggiore Mosaics', *AB*, Vol. 65, No.2. 325-328.

[56] Terry, A., and Maguire, H., (2007) *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč.*

Chapter One

The birth and rediscovery of the Catacombs of Rome

The oldest examples of art identified by scholars since the seventeenth century as representations of the Virgin Mary can be found in the catacombs of Rome. They are generally dated from between the second and fourth centuries and much of our current understanding of the development of the early veneration of Mary rests on this identification.

Although scholars are still divided as to where and when identifiably Christian art first developed, Rome continues to be held up as the fountainhead of artistic styles with other centres around the empire following its lead. [57] There is certainly no doubt that the Roman catacombs offer the most extensive and the best preserved examples of the corpus of early Christian images. They are also one of the only sites where examples of pre-Constantinian Marian art have, rightly or wrongly, been identified.[58]

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[57] See for example Paul Corbey Finney revisionist work on the identification of early Christian art. Finney, P.C., (1994) *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*, 151-152, notes 8 and 9. Finney suggests that the creation of Christian art took place simultaneously over a wide geographical area ranging from Asia Minor to North Africa and across to Europe. He makes the point that to 'search for a single point of origin for early Christian art is an exercise in futility'.

[58] A small Christian catacomb was discovered in Alexandria by Giovanni Battista de Rossi in the 1860s. In one of the chapels he uncovered a fresco he interpreted as depicting various liturgical scenes including the miracle at Cana in which a figure of a woman has a Greek inscription over her head identifying her as 'ΗΑΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ' – 'Holy Mary'. Rossi dated this painting to the first half of the fourth century although he suspected it had been retouched at a later period. Northcote, J.S., & Brownlow, W.R. (1879), *Roma Sotterranea* Vol. 2, 71-72. I suggest a later dating by linking it with Cyril of Alexandria's famous commentary on John's Gospel and the Miracle of Cana that he delivered in the first half of the fifth century. Gambero, L., (1999) *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 245. A rather fine ceiling painting from the Chapel of Peace in the Necropolis of Al-Bagawat Egypt features a standing figure of Mary with a dove in what has been identified as an Annunciation scene. Although originally dated by Pierre Du Bourguet as fourth or fifth century, it is now generally thought to be fifth or sixth century construction, Du Bourguet, P., (trans. by Watson Taylor, S.,) (1965) *Early Christian Painting* , 154; Meinardus, O.F.A., (1999) Two *Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*, 256.

Before looking more closely at the individual examples that have been identified as early Marian images, I believe it is important to consider the complicated history of the surroundings in which they appear. As the creation of the catacombs is inextricably bound up with that of the first Christian communities in Rome, in the first part of this chapter I look at how and by whom the catacombs were first developed using some of the most recent theological scholarship to set the scene. Because the catacombs were largely abandoned and forgotten for more than eight centuries, considering the circumstances of their re-discovery in the sixteenth century forms a vital part in understanding how the early Marian images were identified. The second part of this chapter looks at this period.

The birth of the catacombs

Since the first century of the imperial era, Rome had been a strikingly diverse cultural, religious and political melting pot. It was a city populated by immigrants from across the empire who brought with them a rich variety of religious and philosophical beliefs, all of which for most of the time were tolerated by the Roman state. It was out of this mix that the first Christian groups emerged, initially as disparate groups but eventually joining together to form a universal or Catholic Church.[59] In the past scholars have tended to concentrate on the relationship between pagans and Christians when discussing the history of this period. However, recent scholarship has uncovered a strong current of conflict between the various schools of Christianity in the city.

[59] The standard references remain Chadwick, H., (1993) *The Early Church*; Frend, W.H.C., and Harrison, C., (2005) *The Early Church: From the Beginnings to 461*; Evans, G.R., (ed.) (2004) *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church.*

In his masterful profile of early Christianity the German theologian Peter Lampe describes the Christian groups in second century Rome as made up of a 'breathtaking theological diversity' or 'fractionation'.[60] He suggests that initially they worshipped in small disparate groups assembled in houses owned by sympathetic citizens. By the end of the century these groups had become more established as *ecclesiae* or assemblies presenting their own interpretations of the Christian message. From there they began organising themselves into more cohesive groups operating in specific regions of the city with their own presiding presbyter or elder.[61] At first these congregations maintained friendly relations with their neighbours, exchanging portions of the consecrated bread from their own Eucharist celebrations. However, by the third century, cracks had begun to appear in this veneer of Christian unity as the different congregations battled it out in an attempt to create a monarchical episcopate in Rome. Lampe contends that these power struggles continued right up until the time of Constantine and beyond.[62]

At around the same time that the *ecclesiae* were building their individual identities a dramatic change was happening in the city's burial practices. After centuries of

[60] He suggests that as the first pre-Pauline Christians in the city were Jews or *sebomenoi* (a term he defines as sympathisers of Jewish monotheism who are not yet proselyte), Christianity gained a foothold in Rome via the synagogues in the city. A dispute between the traditional Jews and those that recognised Christ as the Messiah led to the expulsion of some of the ringleaders from the city. This in turn led the Christians to break away from the synagogue. Lampe, P., (2003), *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 69, 381.

[61] Whereas the word *Ecclesia* eventually came to mean Church in the religious sense, its Greek origin was distinctly secular, simply meaning an assembly. Finney, P.C., (1994), 104, n17. Division of ecclesiastical districts was still current by the mid third century. The *Catalogus Liberianus* (LP, I, 4) refers to seven ecclesiastical regions overseen by seven deacons, Davis, R., (2000) *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715* (Translated Texts for Historians), 8. Lampe suggests that initially these communities were able to function side by side operating a type of 'collegial presbyterial system of governance', Lampe, P., (2003), 397.

[62] The key works on this area of conflict remain Lampe for the first two centuries and Curran, J.R., (2000) *Pagan city and Christian Capital: Rome in the fourth century*. See also Brent, A., (1995a) 'Was Hippolytus a Schismatic?' *Vig.C.*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 215-244 and also Blackman, E.C., (2004) *Marcion and His Influence* for the most recent scholarship on the *ecclesia* of Marcion, which in the second century was on the verge of becoming the accepted face of Christianity.

cremating their dead the Romans began instead to adopt the Jewish habit of inhumation. This change in funerary practices led to burial space becoming so scarce that it became necessary to dig subterranean burial chambers into the soft volcanic limestone soil that lined the roads outside the city walls. The Romans referred to these underground chambers as hypogeum and the burial crypts as coemeterium.[63] Because inhumation was linked with both Jewish and Christian religious beliefs, up until the last century most scholars maintained that the catacombs had been created and used only by Christians, whereas recent scholarship has shown that they probably held a mix of pagan, Jewish and Christian dead.[64]

One of the first exclusively Christian burial areas was a catacomb complex in the south of Rome west of the Via Appia. This is an especially fascinating example as not only is it dated to the late second or early third century but it is also located on the first piece of land said to have been owned and administered by an *ecclesia*. The land actually belonged to a wealthy presbyter called Zephyrinus who was the leader or bishop of the largest Christian congregation in Rome. Zephyrinus had tasked the management of the catacomb to his deacon Callistus after whom it was

[63] The word 'catacomb' originated from the Roman toponym *catacumbas* derived from the Greek κατα κύμβας or 'near the hollows' to denote an area along the Via Appia characterised by hollows and wide sandstone cavities. The generic use of the term catacomb to describe all underground burial areas dates from around the ninth century. Stevenson, J., (1978) *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of early Christianity*, 7.

[64] Rutgers, L.V., (Jan., 1992), 'Archaeological Evidence for the Interaction of Jews and Non-Jews in Late Antiquity', *A JA*, Vol. 96, No. 1. 101-118; Johnson, M., (1997) 'Pagan-Christian Burial Practices: Shared Tombs?' *JECS* 5, 1:41. An exception to the rule was the nineteenth century British archaeologist John Henry Parker who claimed as early as 1877 that the catacomb dead were of mixed religion, see Gaston, R.W., (1983) 'British Travellers and Scholars in the Roman Catacombs 1450-1900', *JWCI* Vol. 46, 144-165. Recent radio carbon dating by Rutgers on the ancient Jewish cemetery below the grounds of the public park of the Villa Torlonia on the via Nomentana, shows that the catacomb was begun in the second century making it the oldest known of the Roman catacombs. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8644832/ accessed 15/1/2006.

named. Callistus took over the running of the *ecclesia* following the death of Zephyrinus.[65]

From the fifth century onwards both Zephyrinus and Callistus were retrospectively described as the 'Bishops of Rome'. However in the third century they could only have laid claim to be the bishop of their own congregation around the Via Appia. Other *ecclesiae* were operating in different sections of the city and ultimately took responsibility for their own burial areas, creating in the process a series of rival cult centres. The art historian Jaś Elsner describes Rome at this time as a 'highly fissile community'. He suggests that in their attempts to outdo each other these *ecclesiae* resorted to the age-old technique of visual propaganda and in the process produced the first examples of Christian art.[66] This is a compelling theory with important implications on any accurate understanding of how Marian imagery may have developed and I return to it in Chapter Four.

The catacombs continued to be developed along the roads leading out the city right up until the time of the Emperor Constantine when the newly secure and unified Church finally felt confident enough to establish above ground burials. Even then, although they ceased to be the main cemeteries, Christians continued to visit the catacombs to pay tribute to their own dead and to worship at the tombs of the martyrs.[67] It was around this time that the first major restoration campaign was

[65] Lampe, 24-27; Finney, 146-230. The word bishop comes from the Greek word *episkopos* which can be translated as overseer or leader.
[66] Elsner, J., (2001) 'Cultural Resistance and the Visual Image: The Case of Dura Europos', *CP* Vol. 96, No. 3, 269-304 and Elsner, (2003) 'Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art' in *JRS*, Vol. 93, 114-
[67] Romans traditionally kept specific days to honour their ancestors and visit their graves and individual families would perform specific rites during the thirty day period following the death and on the yearly anniversaries. St. Jerome writing in the fifth century provides us with the earliest description of what it was like to visit the catacombs. He wrote:

instigated by Bishop Damasus who, having seen the growing potential of the pilgrim trade, authorised substantial structural alterations to the catacombs. These included the enlargement of the burial chambers to ease the flow of worshippers and the installation of opening shafts to let in more light. Damasus also commissioned artists to both repaint and even replace some of the earlier art that was in bad repair.[68] Sadly, this period was the last heyday of the catacombs, for over the next four centuries they were repeatedly vandalised during barbarian incursions.[69] Although various popes repaired the damaged tombs, it was finally decided that it was unsafe to bury the dead outside of the city walls or leave the relics of the saints and martyrs unguarded.[70] Even though churches had been erected over some of the sites and special crypts created beneath the floors, without relics the catacombs began to be abandoned, but they were never entirely forgotten. As late as the twelfth century the pilgrims' *Itineraries* were still directing travellers to the catacombs

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> *When I was a boy receiving my education in Rome, I and my schoolfellows used, on Sundays, to make the circuit of the sepulchres of the apostles and martyrs. Many a time did we go down into the catacombs. These are excavated deep in the earth, and contain, on either hand as you enter, the bodies of the dead buried in the wall. It is all so dark there that the language of the prophet (Ps. lv. I 5). seems to be fulfilled, Let them go down quick into hell. Only occasionally is light let in to mitigate the horror of the gloom, and then not so much through a window as through a hole. You take each step with caution, as, surrounded by deep night, you recall the words of Virgil* 'Horror ubique animos, simul ipsa silentia terrent'. *Jerome, Commentarius in Ezechielem*, c. 40, v. 5 cited in Stevenson, J., (1978), 24.

[68] Nicolai, V.F., Bisconti, F., and Mazzoleni, D., (2002) (trans. Stella, C.C., Touchette, L.) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 49-59.

[69] It is not clear how much damage was done to the cemeteries when Rome first fell to the barbarians in 410 and then again in 454. See Osborne, J., (1985) 'The Roman Catacombs in the Middle Ages' in *PBSR* Vol. XL, 296. Osborne claims that The *Liber Pontificalis* appears to lay much of the blame for the damage to the catacombs on to the barbarians but he feels this may have been over exaggerated by the Church. There have been various suggestions made as to why the Christian barbarians may have desecrated the tombs of other Christians such as their inability to read Latin or Greek which may have led them to assume these were pagan tombs. Or they may have been searching for treasures or saintly relics. Lanciani, R., (1967) '*Pagan and Christian Rome'*, 324.

[70] By 648AD Boniface IV had started to move some of the relics into the city and in order to re-house them in splendour he had the Pantheon dedicated as a church. This elaborately decorated structure, once dedicated to the pantheon of pagan deities, was now consecrated to the Virgin Mary and all the Christian martyrs and renamed Santa Maria Rotunda. Krautheimer, R., (2000) *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, 72. The translation of relics from the catacombs continued over the next century up until the time of Pope Paschal I, who in a final bid to bring all the saintly remains into the city had more than 2,300 bodies removed from the catacombs.

while the city's legend filled guidebook the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* continued to include references to the Roman cemeteries right up until the fifteenth century.[71]

However, by this time the flow of visitors had diminished and with it the need to keep the catacombs in good repair had similarly declined. In 1450, John Capgrave an English Augustinian Prior on a visit to Rome wrote in his travelogue about the desolation and disuse of the cemeteries.[72] By the end of the fifteenth century, apart from a few stray and often suspect visitors, the catacombs had become a relic of the past and their art entirely forgotten.[73]

The Rediscovery

They remained that way for more than another century, the tunnels collapsing and silting up and the art crumbling from the walls. While its past lay forgotten the future of the Roman Church, confronted by the challenge of the Reformation, was beginning to look bleak. The Protestants began to publish an array of pamphlets

[71] John Osborne claims that evidence of later mural painting in some of the catacombs shows that although they started to fall into decline in the eighth and ninth centuries they were not finally abandoned until the end of the Middle Ages. There is also some written evidence that a custom of visiting the catacombs barefooted on Good Friday in order to pay respects to the martyrs continued up until the beginning of the eleventh century. The pilgrim *Itineraries* compiled between the seventh and twelfth centuries still referred to some of the tombs. These *Itineraries* were originally written to guide pilgrims around Christian Rome. However we know that they were not updated once the relics were removed. One *Itinerary* appears in the *De Gestis Regum Anglorum* written by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century possibly as a guide to visiting Crusaders. Osborne (1985), 278-328. Unfortunately for the Crusaders who followed it, the *Itinerary* includes tombs that had long been inaccessible. Stevenson, J., (1978), 47. See also Osborne, J., (ed.) (1987) *The Marvels of Rome* and Frend, W.H.C., (1996) *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History*, Chapter 2.

[72] *'Ye moost part of these be now desolate and onknowen nowt only to pilgrymes but eke on to hem that have be there all ther lyve'* Capgrave, J., 'Ye Solace of Pilgrimes' cited in Gaston, R.W., (1983) 144-165.

[73] In 1475 Pomponius Laetus, the founder of the Roman Academy on a visit to the San Callisto catacomb located on the Appian Way, wrote of discovering walls covered with paintings of biblical scenes. Surprisingly he did not seem to make much of his discovery or to encourage further explorations, though there might have been a good reason for this reticence. The Academy boasted an array of scholars and even Catholic priests amongst its membership who all shared a love for classical studies and had even changed their names to those of their pagan heroes. It seems that their exploration of the catacombs was not motivated by Christian piety: they had in fact sought out the most remote of the underground crypts so they could hold their pagan ceremonies, which is perhaps why Pomponius did not wish to advertise the location of his discovery. Lanciani, R (1967), 359.

and historical essays that claimed the Church of Rome had in effect re-written its own history. Reformation scholars maintained that Catholics had developed and followed a dogma entirely unknown to their Christian forefathers: their devotion to the Virgin Mary was cited as a prime example of this deviation, one that veered close to idolatry.[74] Understandably, Catholic scholars were determined to fight back and refute the Protestant claims, yet it was to take another thirty years for their response to appear.[75]

Why did the Roman Church wait so long to issue their contradiction? It seems that they were so confident of their own interpretation of early Christian history that they did not feel pressurised to rush into print. They turned instead to the physical evidence of the early church communities in order to prove their case. This evidence was initially provided by the work of two dedicated and devout churchmen.

The first of these was Onofrio Panvinio, an Augustinian monk who was responsible for developing the first scientific study of Christian antiquity.[76] Throughout his

[74] These accusations form an integral part of the most famous work of Protestant historiography, the *Ecclesiastica historia,* later known as the *Centuriae Magdeburgenses* (Magdeburg Centuries). Compiled by a group of Protestant historians, led by the Lutheran Matthias Flacius Illyricus, the work covered the first thirteen centuries of Christianity in 13 separate folio volumes. The underlying message of this tome was that Christianity had been hijacked by the Roman Church, who had injected into it a doctrine that was dangerously close to paganism, and thus western Christendom had been entirely corrupted. Flacius Illyricus, Matthias." *Encyclopædia Britannica* from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service. http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9034456 accessed 4/1/2006. The compilation of the *Ecclesiastica historia* was financed by the great and good of Protestant Europe including the kings of Sweden and Denmark, the dukes of Saxony and the cities of Augsburg and Nuremberg. All the volumes were published in Basel between 1559 and 1574**.**
A key study on Marian art during the Reformation is Dillenberger, J., (1999) *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-century Europe*.

[75] The *Annales Ecclesiastici*, also known as the 'Ecclesiastical History from the Birth of Christ till the Year 1198', compiled by a priest and Vatican librarian Cesare Baronio, was finally published between 1588 and 1609 in 12 volumes. In spite of the reputation of its author the work was severely criticised for its historical inaccuracy. The Huguenot scholar Isaac Casaubon was the best known of Baronio's critics who published his *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI* before his death in 1614.

[76] Onofrio Panvinio (1530-1568) became a doctor of theology in 1557 and started his research into the history of the Church. He remained a monk but was appointed corrector and reviser of the books

short career, he wrote numerous historical, theological, archaeological and liturgical works. His research on the cemeteries and sepulchral rites of the early Christians was ground breaking and in 1566 he published a pamphlet on his findings entitled *De Coemeteriis urbis Rome*. Thanks to Panvinio's research, for the first time in over 700 years the Roman Church was beginning to look again at the physical evidence of the earliest Christian communities in Rome.[77]

While Panvinio and his fellow scholars were examining the history of the early Christians, Philip Neri, one of the most charismatic preachers of sixteenth century Rome, was urging his followers to find their inspiration in the devotional practices of the early Christians. Not only was he an ardent devotee of the Virgin Mary, he was also the founder of the highly influential Roman Oratory and was said to have experienced a form of 'Pentecost' while praying in the catacomb of St Sebastian.[78] From then on he displayed a great attachment to the catacombs and promoted them as places for spiritual renewal. He also maintained that the only way to reform the discipline of a failing Church was to 'turn the eyes and hearts of men back to the primitive times of Christianity', claiming that it was within the catacombs that evidence could be found of the religious dogmas of the early church**.**
Thanks in part to the preaching of Neri and the writings of Panvinio, the Catholic Church and its followers were beginning to regard the early centuries of Christianity as a halcyon time for the Church. They believed it was from this period that they

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of the Vatican Library in 1556. He was recognized as one of the greatest church historians and archaeologists of his time. Paul Manutius called him *antiquitatis helluo*, and Scaliger styled him *pater omnis historiae*. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11450a.htm accessed 14/1/2007 *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI. p.X.*

[77] Lanciani, 324 and Nicolai et al, 10.

[78] One of the smallest Christian cemeteries, this has always been one of the most accessible catacombs and is thus one of the least preserved. Neri was said to have experienced a ball of fire entering into his mouth and engulfing his heart. He suffered from a lifetime of heart palpitations and unexplained hot flushes and after his death doctors discovered an enormous tumour above his heart. Türks. P., (1995) *Philip Neri: The Fire of Joy*, 19. Throughout the book Türks also discusses Neri's apparitions of the Virgin Mary and his lifetime devotion to her, 83, 111, 136, 152 and 164.

could find the means to fight the threat of Protestantism. In this religious and cultural climate the discovery of an intact and previously unknown catacomb extensively decorated with Christian images must have appeared as nothing short of miraculous. One Catholic scholar summed up the mood of the moment when he described the catacombs as 'arsenals from which to take the weapons to combat heretics, and in particular the iconoclasts...'[79]

The discovery that rocked both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches was made on the 31st May, 1578.[80] This was the date when labourers, digging for pozzolana in the vineyard of Bartolomeo Sanchez two miles outside the gates of Rome, struck a spade through the ceiling of a vast underground cemetery full of frescoes, sarcophagi and inscriptions. So large and beautifully decorated was this catacomb that for a while people believed that it was a complete underground city.[81] The subjects portrayed in the frescoes were said to have contained almost the whole cycle of early Christian symbolism including the Old and New Testament themes. This substantial repertoire of art provided for the first time secure evidence that the early Christians had used art as an integral part of their doctrine and funerary rituals. It also presented the earliest examples of mother and child images that could be interpreted as the Mary and the baby Jesus.[82]

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[79] Rutgers, L.V., (2000) *Subterranean Rome*, 13. The scholar was Giovanni Severano who edited the posthumous works of Antonio Bosio. Bosio, A., (1650) *Roma Sotterranea*.
[80] Nicolai et al (2002), 130.
[81] Scholars from across Europe descended on the site, Nicolai et al (2002), 130.
[82] Stevenson, 48 and Schaepman, A.C.M., (1929) *Explanation of the Wallpainting in the Catacomb of Priscilla*, 12-13. Unfortunately we are no longer able to study the original frescoes as the rediscovered catacomb was plundered to such an extent that by the end of the century almost every trace of the images had disappeared. For an additional detailed discussion on the re-discovery of the catacombs and their art see Nestori, A., (1975) *Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane*. Paul Corby Finney gives an excellent analysis of the development of the earliest catacomb of Callistus in Finney, (1994), Chapter 6. Graydon F. Snyder's *Ante Pacem* updated in 2003 is still the most incisive analysis of Christian archaeological data pre Constantine. Synder, G.F., (2003) *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine.*

These first impressions and interpretations of catacomb art, however erroneous, gave fresh hope to the beleaguered Church. They were confident that they had discovered the actual physical remains left by the first Christians. The wall paintings were cited by Catholic scholars as evidence that art had always been an integral part of early Christian practice. In the absence of any identifying inscriptions they developed a method of interpreting the images they found by using biblical and patristic literature as their source.[83] This material was used to claim that the recent wave of Protestant iconoclasm was historically unjustified and perhaps more importantly, that the veneration of the Virgin Mary was not a recent Catholic invention. Discovering her depiction on the walls of these underground cemeteries was all the physical proof that Catholic scholars needed.[84]

Protestant historians poured scorn on this discovery, claiming it was impossible to interpret the meaning of the paintings in the darkness of the catacomb tunnels. Their scepticism was not entirely unfounded. As many scholars were unable to make the journey down into the catacombs they often commissioned artists to copy some of the frescoes that had been discovered. Unfortunately, the copyists did not always faithfully reproduce what they saw by the light of their flickering lamps. An unclear image would often be re-interpreted in a contemporary style with sometimes comical results. For example, an image of a good shepherd figure became St. Priscilla in a farmyard surrounded by cockerel and sheep (**Fig 1**), while a Noah emerging from the top of the Ark was transformed into Pope Marcellus preaching

[83] Snyder suggests that this style of interpreting archaeological data is still endemic within what he refers to as the 'Roman School', Snyder (2003), 10.
[84] Rutgers (2000), 13.

(**Fig 2**) and an Adoration of the Magi scene turned into the martyrdom of a naked female saint (**Fig 3**).[85]

However well meaning and enthusiastic these early explorers may have been, as well as lacking the understanding of the correct methods for recording the images they also had no idea how to preserve the art that had been uncovered. It took a Maltese lawyer by the name of Antonio Bosio to create a scientific system for this new discipline of Christian archaeology. In 1593 Bosio started his exploration of the catacombs by first studying the early Christian literature, such as the lives of the martyrs, alongside the accounts of the Church Councils. After realising that most of the catacombs were located on the roads leading out of Rome he then combined his maps of the Roman highways with the pilgrims' *Itinerari*. Using both resources he was able to locate and uncover around 30 catacombs, discovering hundreds of inscriptions, frescoes and sarcophagi carvings in the process.[86] He carefully documented the hundreds of images he uncovered from 1593 onwards and working with two artists, he meticulously illustrated every piece of art he found.[87] However, like his predecessors, Bosio brought both his own agenda and that of the Roman Church to the identification of the scenes he uncovered in the catacombs, regularly exploring the subterranean chambers with Cesare Baronio who was by then a

[85] These pen and ink sketches were published in the late sixteenth century with detailed descriptions of the images by Alfonso Chacon, the antiquarian Philip van Winghe and Jean L'Heureux. Chacon, also known as Ciacconio, described the good shepherd scene as 'St Priscilla feeding the preachers of the gospel, represented as cocks, and the faithful Christians as sheep', Stevenson, 48.

[86] For a modern analysis of the work of Bosio see Rutgers, L.V., (1997) 'Text before trowel: Antonio Bosio's Roma Sotterranea revisited', in Swanson, R.N (ed.) *The Church Retrospective:Studies in Church History*, 33, 343-60 and Frend (1996), Chapter 2.

[87]The illustrations were reproduced from line engravings in copper when they were published in *Roma Sotterranea* and later art historians were often highly critical of their accuracy describing them as:

> *having not even the merits of caricatures, for a caricature is the exaggeration of the qualities of the thing portrayed, whereas these are its negation.*

Richter, J.P., (1905) 'Early Christian Art in the Roman Catacombs', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 6, No. 22, 287. However, this criticism was usually levelled only at Bosio's copyists whereas his own sketches are generally regarded as being far more accurate. Stevenson, 51.

cardinal and head of Neri's Oratory church. Both Bosio and the later editors of his work identified almost every image found, in the most part confidently labelling them as figures from the Old and New Testaments, early church histories and the lives of saints.[88]

This oversimplified method of identification seems to have been adopted by many of his contemporaries, as can be seen in a reproduction of an orante figure (**Fig 4**). Without any other apparent corroborating evidence the painting has been identified as *Virgo Dei paratrix* – 'the Virgin bearer of God'.[89] A copy of this seventeenth century painting forms part of a vast collection of antiquarian drawings and prints known as *The Paper Museum of Cassiano Dal Pozzo*. Many of these drawings are of early Christian and medieval antiquities and amongst this collection can be found at least three pen and ink drawings of fragments of sarcophagi that purport to feature images of Mary and Jesus. Even though stylistically these fragments appear to pre-date Christianity, the mother and child figures have automatically been identified as a Madonna and Child tableau (**Figs 5-7**).[90]

Bosio had always intended to make his work available to the world, but unfortunately he died in 1629 before completing his research and it was left to another Oratorian, Giovanni Severano, to finish off his writings and publish them

[88] Snyder, (2003), 6.
[89] This is a detail from a watercolour from a collection of catacomb frescoes possibly copied by Ciacconio from an original by Van Winghe. Now in the Biblioteca Vallicelliana, MS G6 with a copy in 'The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo'. Osborne, J., and Claridge, A., (eds.) (1998) *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities*, Vol. 2, 67.
[90] For a detailed history of the 'Paper Museum of Cassiano Dal Pozzo' see the recently published Catalogue Raisonné and in particular Part II of Series A edited by Osborne and Claridge (1998) as above.

posthumously.[91] In fact in the fourth volume of the book it is Severano rather than Bosio who provides the majority of the interpretative analysis, even though he attributes the work to his deceased colleague. Severano fervently believed that only Christians had been buried in the catacombs and maintained that although pagan signs and symbols appeared there, they had been adopted by Christian artists and given entirely new meaning.[92]

All the volumes of Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea* were republished in 1651 in a Latin translation by another Oratorian, Paolo Aringhi, but with considerable alterations and omissions. Regularly reprinted with a special pocket edition being produced in 1671, it became the definitive work on the catacombs until the middle of the nineteenth century.[93]

It is the content of this translation that seems to have provoked the most vigorous backlash amongst Protestant historians. Writing in 1685 Bishop Gilbert Burnet, one of the earliest historians of the Reformation, was highly critical on the whole subject of the catacombs saying:

> *Those burying places that are now graced with the pompous title of Catacombs are no other than the Puticuli mentioned by Festus Pompeius,*

[91] Bosio left his manuscripts to the Order of the Knights of Malta. The ambassador of the Knights in Rome, Prince Carlo Aldobrandini, showed Bosio's research to Cardinal Francesco Barberini nephew of pope Urban VIII and state secretary. Barberini appointed Giovanni Severano to edit the work and it was published in 1632 under the title of *Roma Sotterranea, opera postuma di Antonio Bosio Romano, antiquario ecclesiastico singolare de' suoi tempi. Compita, disposta, et accresciuta dal M. R. P. Giovanni Severani da S. Severino.*
[92] Stevenson, 52.
[93] Rutgers (2000), 22

where the meanest sort of the Roman slaves were laid, and so without any further care about them were left to rot.

He then went on to suggest that the frescoes and carvings found in the catacomb were forgeries, the work of a handful of monks who had then sealed the entrances of the tombs with the intention of miraculously revealing them at a later date, pretending that they had learnt about them in a vision.[94] It was not only the Protestants who were critical of the current scholarship. Jean Mabillon, a contemporary of Burnet and a Benedictine, wrote about his concerns regarding the methodology used for identifying the tombs of martyrs.[95]

Despite these criticisms *Roma Sotterranea* encouraged a whole new generation of explorers to look more closely at the ancient art. Unfortunately their primary motivation appears to have been the search for holy relics, resulting in the destruction of some fine examples of wall paintings and sarcophagi.[96]

[94] Burnet may have been inspired by the writings of the Protestant spy Anthony Munday who had travelled to Rome posing as a candidate for the priesthood. He wrote *The English Romayne Life* in 1582 in which he talks about how the Jesuits of the English College planted bones in the catacombs and then went on to claim they were the actual bones of saints. Northcote & Brownlow, Vol. 1, 38-39. Thompson, B., (1941) 'Anthony Munday's Journey to Rome, 1578-9' *Durham University Journal XXXIV*, 1-14; Bishop Burnet, (1687) 'Some Letters from Italy and Switzerland in the years 1685 and 1686', 209, 211 cited in Northcote, Rev. J.S., (1857), *The Roman Catacombs, or, some account of the burial places of the early Christians in Rome*, 8.

[95] Gaston (1983), 151.

[96] In the seventeenth century various Popes are said to have given different individuals and religious bodies special privileges to remove the bodies of martyrs. Unfortunately, this systematic desecration continued well into the eighteenth century, often with official sanction. Marc Antonio Boldetti was the priest in charge of Santa Maria Trastevere who had been designated as custodian of the catacombs. He personally oversaw the removal of hundreds of tomb inscriptions, pagan and Christian, which were either taken to his own church or scattered around the other churches of Rome with no record kept of their place of origin. He also ordered the opening of tombs in search of martyrs' relics, and the removal of some of the frescoes and then added to the confusion by publishing in 1720 an entirely unscientific study on the catacombs, entitled the *Osservazione sopra i cimiteri de' santi martiri ed antichi cristiani di Roma*. At the end of the century Pope Clement XI and his successor Clement XII brought the care of the catacombs back under Papal control. Although this kept things under one roof it did not change the prime motif of the catacombs excavations – the extraction of relics. Frend (1996), 24; Northcote (1857), 44.

In the mid eighteenth century Pope Benedict XIV renewed interest in the early Church and its art by creating a *Museo Ecclesiastico.*[97] Thanks to this patronage new expeditions were launched to explore the underground cemeteries but sadly once again often with disastrous consequences for the art.[98]

It is impossible to know just how much of the original art within the catacombs was destroyed during their rediscovery. Although by the dawn of the next century excavation work did begin to be carried out in a more scientific manner it brought with it a set of new issues and agendas that would in turn have a substantial affect on how Marian art would be interpreted. I consider more of those issues in the next chapter.

[97] Pope Benedict gave the task of developing the new museum to Giuseppe Bianchini, the secretary of the *Accademia di Storia Ecclesiastic* based in the Oratory of the Chiesa Nuova. Bianchini had devoted his life to completing the *Historia Ecclesiastica* which aimed to 'prove' the history of the Church through its material remains.

[98] Unfortunately archaeological methods, even when authorised by the Vatican, were just as haphazard and destructive as they had always been. For example in 1780 Jean-Baptiste-Louis-George Seroux d'Agincourt, a wealthy French nobleman turned amateur archaeologist, researched many of the ancient cemeteries copying scores of frescoes for publication. As well as copying the frescoes he also organised the removal of many of the original paintings causing irreparable damage in the process. Seroux d'Agincourt, J. B. L. G., (1823**)** *Histoire de l'art par les monumens : depuis sa décadence au IVe siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XIVe* details his work.

Chapter Two

Catacomb Archaeology in the 19th and 20th Centuries and the 'oldest images of Mary'.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Jesuit priest Giuseppe Marchi instigated the first really systematic study of Christian art. In 1844 he published *Monumenti delle arti cristiane primitive* and his work inspired Pope Pious IX to establish in 1851 the *Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra* to protect and explore the catacombs.[99] However, it was Giovanni Battista de Rossi, a pupil of Marchi who finally turned Christian archaeology into a proper science. Commissioned by the Vatican he spent more than 50 years researching the remains of the early Christians of Rome uncovering many new catacombs in the process and in 1863 he launched a new periodical entitled *Bollettino di archeologia cristiana*. This was followed between 1864 and 1877 with the publication of his three volume magnum opus entitled *Roma Sotterranea Cristiana* which concentrated on the art of the catacomb of Callistus. In 1875 he set up the *Società dei Cultori di Archaeologia Cristiana*.[100]

His work, supported by papal commissions, gave rise to a 'school' of early Christian archaeology that extended throughout Europe. This school was made up of a new generation of Christian archaeologists, headed by Rossi's own students Mariano Armellini, Henry Stevenson and Orazio Marucchi, who continued to publish the *Bollettino*. As well as raising the profile of the catacombs in Italy, Rossi was also instrumental in bringing the catacombs to the attention of an English speaking

[99] Frend, W.H.C., (1996) *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History*, 77.
[100] Ibid, 79-90.

audience thanks to his relationship with James Spencer Northcote, an Anglican priest who had converted to Catholicism. In 1864 and 1867 Northcote, in collaboration with the Rev. William R. Brownlow, published Rossi's *Roma Sotterranea* in two volumes combined with several articles from the *Bollettino* which were translated into English.[101]

It is clear that by this point Catholic and even some Protestant scholars had no doubt that Mary had played an important role in early Christian doctrine and that the catacomb artists had produced several images of her. Indeed, in his 1882 *History of the Church* the Swiss Protestant theologian Philip Schaff wrote that, although it had originally been thought that no images of Mary had existed from before the Council of Ephesus, nearly 50 representations of Mary had now been discovered in the catacombs. A fact that inspired him to exclaim:

> *No excesses of Mariolatry, sinful as they are, should blind us to the restraining and elevating effect of contemplating, with devout reverence, the ideal of all womanhood, so mild, so merciful, so strong, so good, so patient, peaceful, loyal, loving, pure.*[102]

[101] Revs. J. Spencer Northcote and William R. Brownlow were some of the first writers to identify the figures of the 'Good Shepherd' and the orantes (figures with their arms outstretched in prayer), as representations of Christ as the new Adam and Mary as the new Eve. Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R., '*Roma Sotterranea'* Vol. 2, 137. For a succinct history of other English scholars' work in the catacombs see Gaston, R.W., (1983) 'British Travellers and Scholars in the Roman Catacombs 1450-1900', *JWCI* Vol. 46, 144-165.

[102] Because of what was perceived as pro-Catholic views Philip Schaff was once was charged with heresy. Schaff, P., (1890) *History of the Christian Church* Chap. 6 81 http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/ accessed 21/4/2008.

Henry C. Sheldon was another nineteenth century Protestant scholar who penned a version of the *History of the Christian Church.* He also was heartened by the discoveries of the so-called pre Constantinian Marian art in the catacombs. However he made much of the simplistic images of Mary which he claimed provided 'witness to the freedom of the early Church from any idolatrous veneration of the Virgin Mary'.[103] It is interesting that neither Schaff nor Sheldon were happy with the growing tendency amongst the Catholic archaeologists and churchmen to identify the numerous orantes as the Virgin Mary or even a personification of the Church praying for sinners.[104] In their view this was an interpretation that took the early Christians dangerously close to idol worshippers.

According to Sheldon:

> *To represent Mary under a form that was also applied to the commemoration of ordinary Christian women, is vastly different from portraying her as the crowned queen of heaven. There is nothing definite in the monuments in favour of Mariolatry; and since the whole literature of the first three centuries is destitute of all evidence on the side of this form of idolatry, no indefinite monumental representation is to be warped into an indication of such idolatry within those centuries*.[105]

[103] Sheldon, H.C., (1894) *History of the Christian Church* Vol. 1, 312-313
[104] One of Cardinal Newman's close friends William Palmer dedicated a whole chapter of his book *An Introduction to Early Christian Symbolism,* published posthumously by Northcote & Brownlow in 1885, to the subject of the orante and the personification of the Church. He identified the figures of Peter and Paul as representations of the Church of the Gentiles and the Church of the Jews. When they appeared flanking a female orante, he confidently identified her as the Virgin Mary. Palmer, W., (1885) *An Introduction to Early Christian Symbolism,* Chapter II.
[105] Sheldon, H.C., (1894), 312-313.

Even at this late date the majority of these authors were still using the work of copyists for their evidence of catacomb art, many having never visited the sites they wrote about.[106]

When the French Protestant minister Dr. Jean Louis Theophile Roller pioneered the use of photography in his two volume *Les catacombs de Rome* published between 1879 and 1881, it seemed that the margin for human error might finally be eliminated. Although Roller was the first to use this method, his work was soon overshadowed by that of the indomitable Jesuit archaeologist Joseph Wilpert who was able to colourise his photos. The German born priest had already devoted himself to the study of the catacombs while fighting a rearguard action against the growing voices of criticism from non-Catholic archaeologists. These scholars were becoming increasingly critical of the way Roman archaeologists were interpreting their discoveries. Wilpert published several impressive studies on the art he discovered in the catacombs, but his greatest work was undoubtedly *Die Malereien der Katakombem Roms,* published in 1903 in two folio volumes. In order to illustrate the book Wilpert commissioned the photographer Pompeo Sansaini and his son Renato who made more than 600 plates of the frescoes which were printed on specially treated paper. He also employed a watercolourist called Carlo Tabanelli whom he would take down into the catacombs so he could record the colours used in the frescoes. Tabanelli then painted the photographs with what he thought were the appropriate colours. *Die Malereien der Katakombem Roms*

[106] When the Jesuit archaeologist Raffaele Garrucci published a six volume work between 1872 and 1880 entitled *Storia dell'arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa 1 – VI,* complete with more than 500 illustrations, most prepared by copyists, it was almost universally condemned for its inaccuracy. *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI.* http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11450a.htm accessed 21/4/2008.

contains over 267 colour plates and is still used today as a key point of reference for scholars of early Christian iconography.[107]

Wilpert's work in the catacombs, uncovering, recording and restoring the frescoes and sarcophagi carvings, carried on until his death in the middle of the twentieth century. He made a substantial contribution to our current understanding of the development of Christian art, but he also brought with him an unshakeable conviction that the paintings and sculptures he documented carried a clear Christian message, in particular those he had identified as depictions of Mary. He wrote:

> *These paintings better than any written document from the period of the persecutions, characterise the position of Mary in the Church of the first four centuries and show that, in terms of substance, she was the same person then that she would later become.*[108]

Wilpert continued his work into the middle of the twentieth century, but by the 1920s his methods were already coming under attack from a new generation of German academics who were attempting to bring science rather than theology into their studies of early Christian archaeology. Hans Lietzmann from Berlin University and Franz Joseph Dölger from the University of Bonn, joined forces to challenge the traditional apologist methods used by Wilpert and his colleagues in

[107] Wilpert believed his plates of catacomb frescoes and earlier mosaic work to be far superior to any other reproductions of the time and in 1930 published *Erlebisse und Ergebnisse im Dienste der christlichen Archäologie in* which he rather immodestly praised his painstaking techniques. Nordhagen, P.J., (1985) 'Working with Wilpert. The Illustrations in 'Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien' and their Source Value', *AIRN*, Vol. V, 247-257. For a fuller list of nineteenth century scholarship on the catacombs see Schaff , P., (1890) Chapter 6; 81. http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/ accessed 21/4/2008.

[108] He made these identifications despite there being a complete absence of inscriptions. Wilpert, J., (1903) *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* Vol. 1, 197.

Rome. Out of this union grew the 'Franz Joseph Dölger Institute for Research into Late Antiquity' and the increasing distance between these two groups of scholars led to them being referred to as the 'Roman School' and the 'Bonn Group'.[109]

Dating was one of the more controversial issues that taxed both groups.[110] Since the time of Bosio in the seventeenth century, many of the 'Roman School' scholars used only patristic texts as their primary source and consequently dated many of the the wall paintings in the catacombs to as early as the second century.
Writing in the 1930s, in response to one of Wilpert's lecture series, the German scholar Paul Styger insisted that the time had come to adopt a far more scientific method for dating. He argued that in the absence of clearly dated inscriptions the only accurate way to date the paintings was by stylistic comparison.[111]

Nowadays science has begun to prevail and most modern scholars describe Wilpert's work in fairly disparaging terms, blaming him for creating a gulf between the diverse Christian and non-Christian artistic traditions. Indeed, Professor

[109] Frend, W.H.C., (1996), 213. Another issue of contention between these groups has been whether the themes recurrent in the tomb decorations are entirely new Christian imagery or pagan themes adapted and reinterpreted to give a Christian message. See Murray, M.C., (1977), 'The Christian Orpheus', *CA* 26, 19-28; Huskinson, J., (1974) 'Some Pagan Mythological Figures and Their Significance in Early Christian Art,' *PBSR* 42, 68-97. Mathews, T.F., (1999) *The Clash of Gods*, argues for a reinterpretation of the whole concept of themes used in early Christian art. For evidence of mixed burials between pagans, Christians and Jews see Johnson, M., (1997) 'Pagan-Christian Burial Practices of the Fourth Century: Shared Tombs?' *JECS*, Vol. 5, 37-59 and Rutgers, L.V., (1992) 'Archaeological evidence for the interaction of Jews and Non-Jews in Late Antiquity,' *AJA* 96, 101-18. Both authors suggest that pagan, Jewish and Christian art appeared in close proximity in mixed tombs. See also Frend (1996), 370-371 and most recently Elsner, J., (2003) 'Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art' in *JRS* Vol. 93, 114-128.

[110] It is still a complicated area, see Février, P., A., (1989) 'À propos de la date des peintures des catacombs romaines', *RAC* 65: 102-34. For an excellent overview on the current debate see Salvadori, S.M., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome,* 513-534.

[111] Styger, P., (1935) *Die römischen Katakomben*, 12. This scepticism was supported by another German scholar Fritz Wirth (1934) *Römische Wandmalerei vom Untergang Pompejis bis ans Ende des dritten Jahrhunderts*, who asserted that there was no Christian art dated before the third century, 226.

Fabrizio Bisconti the current secretary of the PCAS in Rome describes the methodology used for the study of catacomb art at the beginning of the twentieth century as being:

> *impregnated with powerful apologetic aims, clear confessional character, to a considerable extent defined by speculation, preconceived hermeneutic methods and heavily dogmatic interpretations.*[112]

He also appears to have called a temporary truce between the Roman and Bonn schools by announcing that scholars from Rome had withdrawn from debating about dating and identification in order to reflect on their research and concentrate on the conservation and cataloguing of the paintings.[113]

The oldest images of Mary?

Having reviewed the history of the catacombs and the scholarship that accompanied their rediscovery, I would like now to turn to the key examples of early Marian art that were first identified as such by Antonio Bosio. Despite Bisconti's own concerns about the dangers of making 'heavily dogmatic interpretations' and the continuing absence of any identifying inscriptions, it is puzzling that the majority of these images are still unquestionably presented as early Christian portraits of Mary and Jesus.

[112] Nicolai, V.C; Bisconti, F; & Mazzoleni, D., (2002) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 133.
[113] Ibid, 135.

As we have already seen, even when he first started to explore the catacombs, Bosio was working to an agenda. He had been given a remit from the Vatican to provide evidence from the catacombs to help refute at least some of the Protestant accusations. Idolatry was one especially damning condemnation, so discovering that the early Christians used art to illustrate their faith was hugely important. Even more important was being able to prove that Mary had been venerated by the early Church and was not an idolatrous invention of the Roman Church. Fortunately, Bosio and his successors were able to find a selection of mother and child wall paintings throughout the catacombs that could be identified as Mary holding her young son.

One of the first mother and child frescoes to be identified as Mary and Jesus by Bosio was found in the catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria, one of Rome's oldest Christian cemeteries (**Fig 8**).[114] Nowadays very few scholars consider the fresco to be a genuine contender for the accolade of the oldest Virgin and Child image. In fact it makes up the third part of a much more detailed tableau painted in a lunette above an arcosolium in a small cubiculum within the catacomb (**Fig 9**). The whole painting consists of three separate scenes. On the left are three figures, one is obviously female and wears a pale yellow *dalmaticus* decorated with narrow stripes, she is standing and faces the viewer while holding a scroll in her hands.[115] Behind her is a smaller male figure, he is dressed in white and is holding what looks

[114] The catacomb is said to have taken its name from Priscilla a Roman aristocrat belonging to the senatorial family of the *Acilii Glabriones* who donated the land for use as a cemetery. Tolotti, F., (1970) *Il cimitero di Priscilla. Studio di topografia e architettura*, 169; Carletti, S., (2005) *Guide to the Catacombs of Priscilla*, 11; Snyder, G.F., (2003) *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, 157-158. Several early martyrs and Popes were also buried in the catacomb including Marcellus (d. 310) Marcellinus (d. 304); Sylvester (d. 335); Liberius (d. 366); Siricius (d. 398); Celestius (d. 432) and Vigilius (d. 555).

[115] The dalmatic or dalmaticus was a new form of tunic that became a popular fashion item in the late third or early fourth century. It was a 'T' shaped tunic, decorated with vertical panels usually unbelted with wide sleeves. Croom, A.T., (2002) *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 83-84.

like a piece of fabric. To the right of the woman, resting his hand on her shoulder, is an older male figure seated on a high backed chair, he has a curly grey beard and wears a long white *dalmaticus* striped on the sleeve. In the centre of the painting stands an orante figure of indeterminate sex with unusually large hands. The orante's eyes are raised to heaven and he or she is wearing a dark red *dalmaticus* with patterned stripes and a heavy white veil, also striped. On the right side of the tableau another female figure wearing a white striped *dalmaticus* gazes to the right and holds a small naked child on her lap. When Bosio first uncovered the tableau he described it as representing 'the holy matron St. Priscilla', as the orante. He proposed that the scene on the right side of the tableau was that of the veiling of the martyr St. Pudentiana or her daughter St. Praxedes, both said to have been buried in the catacomb. He identified the seated man as Pope Pius who he said was conducting the ceremony and suggested that the woman and child on the left were the Virgin and Child. Many of the archaeologists who followed Bosio agreed with his interpretation, but other theories veered between scenes from the life of Susanna to that of Mary and Joseph.[116]

In the nineteenth century, Wilpert suggested that the orante in the centre of the painting symbolised the occupant of the tomb who was a consecrated virgin. The scene on the left he said represented her veiling ceremony, while the mother and child on the right was almost certainly Mary holding the baby Jesus, her presence intended to provide the young virgin with a perfect role model. This interpretation

[116] Schaepman, A.C.M., (1929) *Explanation to the Wallpainting in the Catacomb of Priscilla*. This paper gives a detailed explanation of the various interpretations of the fresco known as 'The Veiling'.

of the tableau led to the cubiculum being dubbed *Velatio* meaning the 'Chamber of the Veiling'.[117]

However, contemporary antiquarians such as Otto Mitius were sceptical of Wilpert's interpretation. Mitius was convinced that the tableau represented scenes from the life of a dead mother. Certainly, this type of anecdotal narrative was popular in pagan funerary art where it was used as a way of paying tribute to the deceased. A fine example of this technique can be seen in a near contemporary sarcophagus dated to between the second and third century and showing various scenes from the child's life (**Fig 10**).[118]

Mitius also believed that the uncovered head of the woman and the unusual position of the child proved that this was not Mary and the 'divine infant' and he remarked on the striking resemblance between the two female images and the central orante figure.[119] Paul-Albert Février writing in the 1960s supported this idea, suggesting that in the left hand scene the woman is holding an open scroll rather than a veil, which indicates that the scene had been designed to illustrate her intellectual rather than spiritual life.[120] In spite of these conflicting theories, throughout the twentieth century, the seated figure continued to be identified as Mary holding the baby Jesus. Indeed, Orazio Marucchi's *Manual of Archaeology* published in the 1920s dismissed the idea that the tableau represented a scene from real life and firmly maintained that:

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[117] Ibid, 13.
[118] Ibid, 20. See also Chapter 3 of this thesis for a more detailed discussion on 'anecdotal' sarcophagi.
[119] Ibid, 21.
[120] Frend, (1996), 336. This idea was also promoted by Grabar, A., (1980) *Christian Iconography: a study of its origins*, 188.

> *This group is of the greatest importance because it proves that the Virgin Mary was represented by the first Christians not only as a subject of veneration, but also as a model of virtue to be imitated*.[121]

John Beckwith's *Early Christian Art*, first published in 1970, identified the fresco as 'possibly a very early Virgin and Child' and this photo caption was still in place in the 1993 reprint. Even more recently, the book that accompanied Melvyn Bragg's 1999 ITV series 'Two Thousand Years', confidently refers to the image as part of 'a third-century fresco showing the Virgin Mary as Theotokos'.[122] Nowadays, the identification has turned full circle and more recent publications follow the Mitius interpretation.[123]

The next image of a possible contender for the title can be found in the lunette of the arcosolium of a chapel in the Coemeterium Maius near the basilica of St. Agnes (**Fig 11**). The painting shows a richly dressed lightly veiled woman in the orante position with the head and shoulders of a boy resting against her chest. On either side of her are painted *Chi-Rho* monograms with the symbols unusually mirroring each other. The dress of the woman and the inclusion of the monograms have led some scholars to date this image to the time of Constantine and even to suggest it was used as a devotional image.[124]

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[121] Marucchi, O., (1949) *Manual of Christian Archaeology*, 322.
[122] Beckwith, J., (1993) *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 21; Partner, P., (1999) *Two Thousand Years, the First Millennium: The Birth of Christianity to the Crusades*, 80.
[123] The official catacomb guide now describes the painting as representing three scenes from the life of a woman buried in the cubiculum, Carletti, S., (2005).
[124] Stevenson, J., (1978) *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of early Christianity*, 88; Marucchi, H., (1902-05) *Les Eléments d'Archéologie Chrétienne* - 3 Vols II, 343, claimed that this image marked the transition between primitive frescoes and the early Byzantine Madonnas. Northcote and Brownlow tell us that Giovanni Battista de Rossi dated the fresco to the age of

As with the images in the chamber of the *Velatio,* it is important to view the mother and child in the context of the other images in the chamber. On the other walls of the arch are two orante figures of an older man and woman facing each other (**Figs 12, 13 & 14**). In the light of this additional detail it may be more appropriate to suggest that the woman and child are the occupants of the tomb, with the side figures representing members of the same family also buried within what is likely to have been a family cubiculum. Mother and child commemorative images were a common tradition in Roman funerary art as can be seen in several examples of pagan funerary stelae (**Fig 15).**[125]

However, one puzzling aspect of this fresco is the inversion of the monogram on the left side of the mother figure. By transposing the *Rho* symbol the painter does achieve an artistic balance, but in the process also negates the effect of the meaning of the glyph as the first letters of the word Christ. It could be argued therefore that

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Constantine and they link the position of the mother and child with later seals from Mount Athos and the *Zuámenskaia* (more commonly known as the Nikopea) type of icon from Russia. Northcote & Brownlow (1879) *Roma Sotterranea* , Vol. 2, 228. Not everyone was so confident. In 1872 Dr. J.W. Appell assistant keeper of the South Kensington Museum referred to the fresco as being 'assigned to the eighth century' and described it as 'a much obliterated painting of the half figure of a woman, with her hands outstretched in prayer, and the half figure of a child placed in front of her, supposed to be intended for the Virgin Mary and the Infant Saviour'. Appell, J.W., (1872) *Monuments of Early Christian Art: Sculptures and Catacomb Paintings*, 57.

[125] Grabar, A., (1980) 36, 211. Theodora Hadzisteliou Price in her study of Greek nursing deities suggested that some stelae with representations of what superficially appear to be images of a *kourotrophos* or nursing goddesses may in fact represent the dead woman in the guise of the goddess. Price, T.H., (1978) *Kourotrophos: Cult and Representations of Greek Nursing Deities*, 46. Wilpert published an example of another mother and older child painting found in the catacomb which he identified as Mary and Jesus, but which now seems to have fallen out of fashion as a Marian image**.** However, on the same page he included a photograph of a group of five orantes who clearly look like a family group and were identified as such by Rossi and Northcote & Brownlow. Wilpert, (1903) *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* vol.1; Northcote & Brownlow Vol 2, 162.

this inscription may have been a later addition, possibly by a non Greek speaker, in an effort to ensure an identification of Mary and Jesus.[126]

The second mother and child fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla is widely regarded by art historians and theologians as the earliest extant representation of Mary (**Fig 16**). Indeed it is a sketch of this image that adorns the website of 'The International Early Mariology Project' (**Fig 17**). The official guidebook to the catacombs of Priscilla published by the PCAS tells us unequivocally that this fresco is the oldest known portrait of the Virgin Mary and dates it to the beginning of the third century, so it is perhaps understandable that the Project would have chosen it as their logo.[127]

The guidebook is not alone in confidently labelling it as the earliest image of Mary, as most books on early Christian and Marian art include details of the fresco.[128] When used as an illustration the image is usually reproduced in the same manner, a closely cropped photograph with no indication of the fresco's size or position. Unless the reader had actually seen the image *in situ* they could be excused from thinking that it was a large and very prominent portrait of the holy couple. In fact, far from commanding pride of place in the underground cemetery, this relatively

[126] The most recent dating based on epigraphic and archaeological evidence places the fresco between 314 and 325. Tronzo, W., (1986), *The Via Latina Catacomb*, 14.
[127] Carletti, (2005), 23.
[128] Not all earlier historians appear to have been quite as convinced as to its identity. Once again Appell introduces a note of caution in his 1872 description of the fresco. Reiterating a later date of the sixth century given by Parker he adds:

> *On the vault over a grave is painted a group of three figures supposed to be the Virgin Mary, with the Holy Child, addressed by one of the Prophets of the Old Covenant (probably Isaiah), who is expounding the Scriptures to her. The Virgin is seated; her head partially covered by a short veil, and holds the Child in her arms. Neither she nor the Child has a nimbus. The Prophet stands opposite her, holding a volumen, in his left hand, and with the right pointing to a star that appears above, We must however not forget to mention that some archaeologists prefer a more natural interpretation of this figure , and take it simply for St Joseph"* Appell, J.W., (1872), 60.

small image was originally painted vertically in an inconspicuous corner of one of the oldest parts of the catacomb of Priscilla at the end of the vaulted roof of an arcosolium. As can be seen in (**Fig 18**), it actually plays second fiddle to a far more prominent stucco image of a good shepherd figure that once formed part of a pair.

Yet in spite of its odd angle, the overall composition of this fresco does indeed provide us with an acceptable and even comforting image of Mary as a practical looking mother, her head loosely veiled, her sleeves rolled up to reveal a sturdy arm as she holds a chubby infant at her breast. The child is turning to look at a standing male figure dressed in a robe that leaves one shoulder bare in the style of a philosopher. The man holds a scroll with one hand and appears to be pointing to a faint outline of a star above their heads.[129]

Overall, this tableau is a familiar and reassuring image that taken at face value appears to provide pictorial evidence that the Christian community in Rome venerated Mary from at least as early as the first half of the third century. However, I suggest that several anomalies need to be reviewed before accepting such a definitive interpretation of the meaning of this fresco.

It is helpful that a thorough analysis of the arcosolium was undertaken in 1992 when Fabrizio Bisconti and a team from the PCAS conducted some emergency restoration work on the fresco.[130] During this work the team were able to discover a

[129] The figure is generally identified as Balaam who is said to have foretold the birth of Christ when he said 'A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (Numbs. 24: 15-17). Other interpretations have included Joseph, Micah, David, Isaiah or even a generic personification of a prophet intended to emphasise the prefiguring of the New Testament by the Old. Nicolai et al (2002), 124 -125. Bisconti, F., (1996) 'La Madonna di Priscilla: interventi di restauro ed ipotesi sulla dinamica decorativa' *RAC 72*, 22 with footnotes 17,18, 19 and 21.

[130] In 1992 the Benedictine Sisters, who caretake the catacomb of Priscilla, called in the PCAS to clean and restore the frescoes after algae started to appear on the paintwork. Fabrizio Bisconti representing the PCAS was able to conduct an extensive analysis of the different stages of the painting. Bisconti, F., (1996), 7-34.

considerable amount of technical detail about the decorative scheme of the whole tomb. Firstly, they analysed the shepherd figure who takes centre stage in the tableau. They dated the figure to between 220 and 230 and suggested that it had once formed part of set of three similar figures made from moulded stucco surrounded by painted trees and an elaborate decorative border made up of red lines, dots and a dark green wolf's tooth design.[131]

The team found evidence that following on from the creation of the shepherds the burial niche was enlarged and turned into an arcosolium. During this extension, the artists abandoned the use of stucco and reverted instead to traditional fresco technique. Bisconti dated the mother and child fresco to this second phase of decoration placing its creation between 230 and 240.[132]

He suggested that the last stages of the development of the tomb's decorative scheme probably took place around the middle of the third century. At this time frescoes were added that included a depiction of a pointing figure on one side of the burial niche and two praying figures on the other. Bisconti described this scene as a representation of two figures in an orante praying position.[133] A nineteenth century drawing of the tomb (**Fig 19**) gives some idea as to how the full tableau may have originally looked once all the decoration had been finished.[134]

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] The final image that appears on the wall below the mother and child has survived as just a faint trace. It was recorded in a watercolour by Camillo Mariani and seems to have represented the bust of an orante figure. Bisconti suggests that this figure was added when new burial chambers started to be added between the end of the third century and the beginning of the next. During his restoration work Bisconti uncovered two inaccuracies in the earlier plates created by Wilpert and his artist. Between the two figures is a small capsule (*capsa parallelepipeda*) and the third figure described by Wilpert on the left is actually part of the border stripe. Bisconti (1996) 7-34.
[134] This drawing was taken from the Vatican-sponsored *Bollettino di Archaeologica Cristiani*, published in 1865 by Giovanni de Rossi and reprinted in 1879 in the English two-volume interpretation of Rossi's work also entitled *Roma Sotterranea* and complied by the Reverends J. Spencer Northcote and William Brownlow. Northcote & Brownlow, Vol. 2 (1879), 139 & 142.

There are of course no inscriptions on the paintings to indicate who the figures in the tableau are supposed to represent. Yet as Northcote and Brownlow confidently stated when they re-produced the drawing in the English version of *Roma Sotterranea*:

> *nobody doubts that the woman and child are the Blessed Virgin and the Infant Jesus*'*… the Catacomb of Priscilla surpasses every other, both for the number, the variety and the antiquity of pictorial representations of our Blessed Lady*'.[135]

They also reported that Rossi had dated the painting to around 150, in part due to its 'classical style' and also because the catacomb of Priscilla was one of the oldest in Rome. They also suggested that the other figures around the tomb might be representations of the 'Holy Family'.[136]

Thanks to Wilpert we also have a copy of a page from Bosio's own sketchbook in which he appears to have roughly copied the figures he discovered decorating the tomb (**Fig 20**).[137] When we compare the Bosio sketch with Rossi's drawing we are confronted with some puzzling anomalies. Both drawings show similar interpretations of one good shepherd figure together with two sheep and two trees as well as the additional sets of figures that appear on the walls either side of the loculus below. One figure is that of man dressed in a pallium pointing into the

[135] Ibid.
[136] Northcote & Brownlow also entered into discussion about the possible presence of Joseph in catacomb art. Ibid, 142.
[137] The original of the sketch appears in the Codex Vallicell fol. 2 (S. 66 f). It is reproduced in Wilpert, J., (1891) *Die Katakombengemälde und Ihre Alten Copien*, Tafel XXVII.

mouth of the loculus and on the other side is a group of three orante figures, a man, woman and possibly a child, although the head of this latter figure is missing.

However the controversial scene of the mother and child is markedly different in each drawing. Bosio has sketched the figures in some detail showing a veiled woman obviously seated, although part of her chair is now missing, holding a child who is looking outwards towards the viewer. The woman's veil sits high on her hair which appears to have been coiled or plaited around her head, a style very much in keeping with the fashions of the time as can be seen in other female images from the catacombs (**Fig 21**). Rather surprisingly no star appears in this drawing and the figure of the prophet is very clearly pointing at the woman rather than up into the sky.[138]

In Rossi's drawing once again we have no obvious star, but the prophet's finger seems now to be pointing up rather than across, and the head of the woman has changed dramatically. This transformation is shown even more clearly in a detailed engraving featured later in the book, in which a star is clearly marked out (**Fig 22**). In both illustrations the woman has lost her elaborate hairstyle and seems to be wearing a simple veil fitting closely to her head, she also appears to be bending her head towards the child. This pose is very unlike the one adopted by the Bosio figure

[138] Bearing in mind the potential for inaccuracy in these early drawings it is striking that Bosio makes a point of emphasising the headwear of the seated woman which is very clearly that of a Roman matron with her veil pinned on top of a high hair bun. Although it is hard to show the texture of the veil in a sketch, it appears similar to the diaphanous veils favoured by the other orante woman in the catacombs.

and far more in keeping with the maternal images of Mary that first start to appear more than three centuries later.[139]

This anomaly becomes even more puzzling when we look at Wilpert's two painted photographs from the arcosolium printed in *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*. The first image (**Fig 23**) shows Mary in a pose almost identical to the Bosio sketch. Her head is upright and she wears her hair piled high covered with a light veil. However, on the next page we are confronted by a close up of what could easily be described as a completely different image (**Fig 24**). The colours are lighter, although this could have been caused by different inks in the printing process. More importantly the woman's head is now very definitely inclined to the left and she is wearing a closely fitting veil which follows the contours of her head. Although a photograph, this image appears far more like the Rossi sketch published by Brownlow and Northcote two decades earlier (**Fig 19**). What is especially puzzling is that in the same publication Wilpert includes a copy of Bosio's original sketch with the caption 'originalzeichnung Bosio der decoration eines loculus der Priscella katakombe'.[140]

Things become even more confusing when we then compare the first Wilpert photo (**Fig 23**) with the more recent photograph taken by the PCAS (**Fig 18).** In this photograph, although the stucco of the shepherd is clearly the same, the fresco is very different. Wilpert's version shows the reddish brown colour of the paint used to create the border patterns and the fruit on the trees as being of a similar shade to

[139] Cameron, A., 'The Early Cult of the Virgin' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) (2000) *Mother of God, Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, 5.
[140] Translated as *Bosio's original drawing of the decoration from a loculus in the Catacomb of Priscilla*. Wilpert, J., (1891) *Die Katakombengemälde und Ihre Alten Copien*. Tafel XXVII.

the fresco, whereas in the more recent photograph the fresco is a paler pinker shade, in fact the same shade as in Wilpert's close up shot. Even more noticeable is the difference between the two female figures, with the PCAS photograph looking identical to the second of Wilpert's images (**Fig 24**).

I suggest that one possible reason for the disparity could be that between the time the first and second photographs were taken, Wilpert had the outline of the head of the woman retraced. When confronted by the rapidly deteriorating fresco and with his total commitment to the presence of Marian images, he may have felt justified in engaging in some judicious restoration using as a guide the same illustrations as those published by Northcote and Brownlow. Rather than accurate depictions these versions of the fresco appear to show a rather idealised view of what the Virgin Mary may have looked like, an image perhaps more in keeping with the ideas of some of the contemporary artists of the nineteenth century such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (**Fig 25**).[141]

The idea that Wilpert may have been working with these earlier drawings has been given some credence by Bisconti's recent restoration work. He pinpointed the same inaccuracies in both the Rossi/Northcote & Brownlow sketch and Wilpert's description of the three praying figures to the left of the loculus. Bisconti found that there were in fact only two praying figures with the smaller childlike figure nothing

[141] Northcote and Brownlow say in the preface of the 1879 edition of *Roma Sotterranea* that although some of their chromolithography and woodcuts were executed in Rome and taken from the work of Rossi, others were taken from the works of Bosio and Aringhi and even from Garrucci's *History of Christian Art* still unfinished in the 1870s. They admitted that they could not vouch as to the trustworthiness of the latter's work as they were copying copies of original paintings. Certainly their illustrations in *Roma Sotterranea* provoked considerable criticism from John Henry Parker the head of the British and American Archaeological Society in Rome. Northcote & Brownlow, Preface Vol. 2. Parker who had, along with Roller, pioneered the use of photography within the catacombs also claimed to have found clear evidence of repainting and restoration work within the catacombs.

more than part of the border decoration; he also discovered a small capsule or scroll between the figures that had not featured in either depiction.[142]

There is clear evidence that Wilpert had been involved in some restoration work on the tomb. In *Die Malereien der Katakombem Roms* he includes a black and white photograph of two pieces of stucco that made up part of the missing second shepherd and the border decoration. The photograph shows that there had been an attempt to re-plaster the shepherd to the archway of the arcosolium (**Fig 26**). Indeed, there is evidence of fresh plaster clearly illustrated in the most recent PCAS photograph (**Fig 18**).[143]

Whether or not Wilpert or others reworked the design of the mother and child image, it seems unlikely that the painting originally formed part of the first phase of the tomb decoration. As we have already seen, Bisconti's recent research has suggested different phases to the decorative scheme of the arcosolium, starting with the stucco shepherds and the elaborate border design.[144]

Although he concluded that the mother and child fresco was probably added in the second phase of the tomb decoration, Bisconti remarked on the stylistic differences between what he describes as the 'vibrant image' of the mother and child and the 'stiff totem like style' of the standing figure.[145] This disparity appears to have become even more clearly marked following a chemical analysis of the plaster

[142] Bisconti (1996), 7-34.
[143] Wilpert (1903), Plate 23.
[144] Bisconti (1996), 7-34.
[145] A free translation of Bisconti's description of the tableau of the mother and child, talks of the 'calming balance of the mother's gesture' and the 'unexpected urgency of the infant's movement as if he is responding to a call that has taken him away from his mother's breast'. The prophet figure he describes as having more solid areas and a posture that is less certain and stiffer. Bisconti (1996), 20.

which revealed an interesting anomaly. Bisconti discovered that although the main part of the mother and child image had been painted as a fresco, the head of the standing figure and the star had been painted dry on to new plaster. These contrasting paint techniques would suggest that the tableau had undergone some design changes after its original creation.

Bisconti's overall analysis of the meaning of the mother and child fresco is both enlightening and contradictory. Initially he suggests that the image, although atypical in the early repertoire of Christian images, may have been an early one-off interpretation of the prophesy of the birth of Christ.[146] However, he then ends his report by acknowledging that the imagery of the breastfeeding mother was relatively commonplace in contemporary scenes both of everyday life and pagan mythological art. Expanding on this theme, he goes on to suggest that the use of a standing figure addressing a seated one could be found in many other examples of pagan funerary art and may have been intended as a representation of the deceased in conversation with their living relative. He even makes the bold statement that this pagan artistic tradition may have been the inspiration for later scenes of the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi.

Bisconti's scientific evidence and artistic analysis provides the possibility of an intriguing new scenario for this ambiguous fresco. Rather than a portrait of Mary and Jesus seated before a prophet figure who is pointing to a star, I suggest instead that we are witnessing a far more poignant domestic scene. Buried in what may have been a family tomb in the catacomb of Priscilla lies a young woman and her

[146] He proposes that there may have been a painting workshop operating at the Priscilla catacomb with artists experimenting with different iconographic themes. Bisconti (1996), 7-34.

child, perhaps the victims of a complicated birth. Their likenesses have been painted above the tomb with the figure standing before them a representation of the bereaved husband and father. He points to the portrait of his deceased family as an indication that they are buried within.[147]

Ironically, it is Bosio's intriguing sketch that appears to supply the evidence that this may have been the case. The drawing shows the standing figure very clearly pointing directly at the mother and child with no star in sight. As Bisconti's chemical analysis clearly shows, later restoration work has completely altered the meaning of the figure with the star a very definite afterthought.

Having deconstructed the three examples identified as the earliest portraits of Mary and Jesus, it is clear that when looking at catacomb art the symbolism of a mother and child should not be regarded as a clear indicator of Marian imagery. Nor indeed should the image of a seated woman being addressed by a standing male, both these compositions appear to have their roots in earlier pagan funerary imagery. This is a link I consider in more detail in the next chapter when I look at examples of catacomb art that have been identified as depictions of the Annunciation to Mary and the Adoration of the Magi.

[147] Bisconti also suggests that the solitary pointing figure indicated in the Northcote and Brownlow drawing of the tomb (**Fig 19)** may have been a depiction of a living relative pointing to the two orantes on the other side of the mouth of the loculus. Ibid, 34.

Chapter Three

Depictions of the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi in Catacomb art

The Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel was a key gospel narrative in which Mary played a major role and yet only two catacomb frescoes have been identified as representations of this iconic scene.[148] The older of these images can be found in the catacomb of Priscilla on the ceiling of a chamber now known as the 'cubicle of the annunciation'. The scene appears within a triple circle of festoons made up of small circles and red dots. It shows a woman seated and a togate man standing before her (**Fig 27**).[149] On the end wall of the chamber is a fresco of a good shepherd surrounded by flowers and other designs and in a niche on the right wall at the centre of an arch is a depiction of Lazarus and Christ. To the right is a sequence of scenes depicting Jonah thrown into the sea, being spewed forth by the sea monster and then resting under the pergola.

Bosio first discovered the frescoes in the seventeenth century and his sketch in *Roma Sotterranea* depicts a seated woman veiled and looking downcast (**Fig 28**). This interpretation is rather at odds with the figure that can be seen today which shows the remnants of a far more regal looking figure seated upright and confidently meeting the eye of the male figure opposite her. Surprisingly, Bosio did

[148] The gospel of Luke provides very little detail about the moment of the Annunciation Luke 1:26-38. The idea that Mary was seated when the angel arrives comes from the Protevangelium of James:

> *And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice saying: 'Hail, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women.' And she looked around the right and to the left to see where this voice came from. And, trembling, she went to her house and put down the pitcher and took the purple and sat down on her seat and drew out the thread.…* The Protevangelium of James, v 11'. Elliott, J.K. (2005) *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, 61.

[149] Mazzei, B., (1999), 'Il cubicolo dell'Annunciazione nelle catacombe di Priscilla. Nuove Osservazioni all luce dei recenti restauri', *RAC 75*, 233-280.

not identify the fresco as an Annunciation scene when he uncovered it and it was left to Giovanni Gaetano Bottari, the eighteenth century curator of the Vatican library, to suggest the interpretation.[150]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century archaeologist Raffaele Garrucci, often credited with inventing the study of graffiti following his work at Pompeii, positively identified the ceiling fresco in Priscilla as a depiction of the Annunciation. However not everyone was convinced, Walter Lowrie in his definitive guide to Christian art and archaeology, first published in 1901 found the identification "doubtful". Although more recently it was referred to as an Annunciation, conservation work carried out in 1996 observed that there had been a considerable amount of damage done to the fresco by previous works of conservation.[151] In my opinion this is yet another example of Bisconti's funerary portrait of a dead woman together with her living relative.

In 1896 Wilpert identified another ceiling painting as an Annunciation, this time in the catacomb of St. Peter and St. Marcellinus. This painting appears in the context of other narrative scenes from the early life of Jesus and presents a far more complex interpretation (**Fig 29**). As can be seen from the illustration, the central figure in the ceiling is the image of Christ teaching the apostles. The four main scenes in the sections surrounding the central image appear to show events from the life of Christ featuring the three magi following the star shaped like the *Chi Rho* symbol and two magi presenting gifts in an Adoration scene. Opposite the

[150] Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (1689-1775) was born in Florence and entered the service of the Corsini family as their librarian. In 1730 he moved to Rome and became custodian of the Vatican Library. A philologist distinguished for his research into the Italian language and literature, he was a member of the *Accademia della Crusca* and edited the fourth edition of its Italian dictionary. Bottari also published various works on the art and archaeology of Rome.
[151] Mazzei, B., (1999), 233-280.

Adoration is a scene of the baptism of Christ and above is the Annunciation scene. In the four corners of the ceiling are images of two male orante figures and two good shepherds. Wilpert wrote a full description of the ceiling paintings as well as producing an outline drawing in his book.[152] The ceiling fresco has now deteriorated so badly that Wilpert's drawing is the only clear evidence we have as to how the original images may have looked (**Fig 30**). Thanks to a contemporary description by Rodolfo Lanciani who visited the cubicle with Wilpert, we can assess just how hard it must have been to interpret the badly degraded frescoes.

> *On December 19, I entered the cubiculum no.54 in which the paintings are, and he began to point out to me outlines of figures and objects, I thought he was labouring under an optical delusion; I could see nothing beyond a blackened and mouldy plaster surface. My eyes, however, soon became initiated to the new experience, and able to read the lines of this curious palimpsest. The dark spots soon grew into shape, and lovely groups, inspired by the purest Christian symbolism, appeared on the walls. There are thirteen pictures, representing the following-named subjects: the annunciation, the three magi following the star (which is shaped like the Chi Rho monogram), their adoration at Bethlehem, the baptism of our Lord, the*

[152] Excavations from 1896 by Wilpert uncovered a number of important frescoes including Christ among four saints, the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the good shepherd, orantes and some miracles of Christ. Wilpert, J., (1891) *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakombe der heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus.* A third possible Annunciation was found in the Via Latina catacomb. It shows a veiled woman seated in a chair with her left hand placed on the armrest. Her right hand is raised and extended. In front of her is the standing figure of a man who seems to be holding a stick in his raised left hand, while his right is extended towards the woman. Unlike other so-called Annunciation scenes a second figure appears to be standing behind the man. The scene was initially thought by both William Tronzo and Antonio Ferrua to be an Annunciation, but has since been re-identified by Umberto Fasola as the Old Testament figures of Judah and Tamar. Stevenson, J., (1978) *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of early Christianity*, 84-85; Ferrua, A., (trans. Inglis, I.) (1991) *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 62; Tronzo, W., (1986) *The Via Latina Catacomb: Imitation and Discontinuity in Fourth-century Roman Painting*, 61.

last Judgement, the healing of the blind, the crippled, and the woman with the issue of blood, the woman of Samaria, the Good Shepherd (twice), the Orantes (twice).[153]

The fact that the magi's star had been portrayed as a *Chi Rho* symbol was an interesting variation of the story of the magi's journey, a narrative tableau I consider in more detail in the next chapter. However, if the ceiling had indeed been created in the late third century as had previously been suggested, then that was nearly fifty years before the Chi Rho symbol came to be used in art.[154] It also seems as if the three figures are dressed in different robes from the magi and are in a pose that bears a striking similarity to an embossed scene on a silver ewer dated the late fourth century. Part of the Traprain Law silver haul, the reconstructed ewer has a scene of the Adoration of the Magi alongside that of three figures looking upward and gesturing. This has been identified as representing the Old Testament scene known as the *Miracle of the Quails*, when the birds appeared in time to feed the Israelites starving in the desert (**Figs 31 & 32**).[155]

Clearly the iconography of these two frescoes is not as straight forward as previous scholars may have thought. In fact I am confident that they were never intended to portray the Annunciation. However, there was another scene that featured a

[153] Lanciani, R., (1967) *Pagan and Christian Rome*, 358.
[154] Deckers, J.G., (2008) 'Constantine The Great and Early Christian Art' in Spier, J., (ed.) *Picturing the Bible*: *The Earliest Christian Art,* 106.
[155] This scene is generally regarded as a pre-figuration of the Eucharist. Spier, J., (2008) (ed.) *Picturing the Bible*: *The Earliest Christian Art,* 253-255. The Traprain Law Treasure was discovered in East Lothian in 1919. It has been dated to around 400. See Curle, A.O., (1923) *The Traprain Treasure*.

woman and child that had a far more obvious link with Mary. This was a tableau said to represent the arrival of the magi following the birth of Christ.[156]

The scene generally referred to as the Adoration of the Magi is arguably one of the most important narrative scenes in the repertoire of early Christian art. It has been calculated that there are 85 different representations of the Adoration still surviving from the catacombs. Seventeen of these are wall paintings and another 68 reliefs have been found on sarcophagi, most of which are dated to the first third of the fourth century, with the remaining percentage to the later part of the century.[157]

The earliest examples of this tableau follow a fairly standard type of iconography. Usually portrayed in profile, a small group of figures process in single file towards a seated woman who holds a miniature figure on her lap.[158] The men, normally three in number, are dressed in pointed conical caps and wear short tunics, leggings and cloaks. They carry offerings for the seated couple that range in shape from boxes and bowls to dishes and wreathes.[159] The iconography of the Adoration, with the three kings, their sumptuous retinues and priceless gifts, had become ingrained in the Christian psyche by the sixteenth century. Consequently, Bosio and the many scholars who followed him had no problem identifying the frescoes and sarcophagi

[156] Nativity scenes featuring the baby Jesus in a manger with the ox and ass and the occasional shepherd do not appear until around the second half of the fourth century and then only on a few sarcophagi where they are juxtaposed with the Adoration of the Magi see (Fig. 42).
[157] Salvadori, S., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, 535-536. She uses as a reference Nestori, A., (1975) *Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane*.
[158] A handful of later sarcophagi carvings show Jesus as a swaddled baby.
[159] For a comprehensive overview of the art of the Adoration see Lafontaine-Dosogne, J., (1975) 'The Cycle of the Infancy of Christ' in Underwood, P., (ed.) *Studies in the Art of Kariye Djami and Its Intellectual Background*, 214 –226.

carvings that featured the scene. This was despite the fact that the imagery bore little resemblance to the Biblical narrative of the arrival of the magi.[160]

In fact only one brief reference to the visit of the wise men or 'magoi' appears in the early gospels. Matthew tells us that 'magoi from the east came to Jerusalem' following a star in search of the 'king of the Jews'. They were sent by Herod to Bethlehem and then 'on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh'.[161]

Later authors did add some variations to the story as we can see from the second century *Protevangelium of James* where the magi are described as finding Jesus in a cave rather than a house.[162] Following on from the elaborations in the apocryphal gospels, early Church Fathers began to use the story of the magi in their writings. For example Tertullian, writing an extensive diatribe against the dualist theologian Marcion in the first half of the third century, compares the magi with the two kings of Arabia and Saba referred to in Psalm 72:10.[163] While Origen, in a homily on the *Book of Genesis* delivered around the same time, links the magi with the Old

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[160] By the sixteenth century the Adoration of the Magi was a story that spoke volumes in support of wealth, power and political domination in the name of Christianity. For a detailed overview of how in the west the symbolism of the magi has been manipulated by different political and social groups since the early Middle Ages see Trexler, R.C., (1997) *The Journey of the Magi.*

[161] Matthew 2:1-16. Neither Mark nor John describes the nativity and Luke only refers to the 'adoration of the shepherds'. The definition of the word *magoi* has taxed many interpreters of the New Testament century. Raymond E. Brown presents the most thorough analysis of the theories versus the evidence in Brown, R.E., (1999) *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 165-201and 571-617.

[162] 'The Protevangelium of James', v 21. Elliott, J.K. (2005), 48-67. The imagery of the cave has become the standard depiction in Orthodox icons of the nativity.

[163] Tertullian 'Adv. Marcion', III, xiii, *ANF*. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-30.htm#P4904_1549646 accessed 2/3/2007. Tertullian's choice of passage from Psalm 72:10
May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute,
May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!
May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!
would later be adopted into the liturgy of the feast of the epiphany. Trexler, R.C., (1997), 12. For a thorough overview of the life of Marcion, see Blackman, E.C. (2004) *Marcion and His Influence*.

Testament story of Isaac and the Philistine king Abimelech.[164] I consider this link in more detail in Chapter Four.

The earliest identifiable artistic portrayal of the Adoration has been dated to between the end of the second and beginning of the third century. It was discovered in the catacomb of Priscilla, but unlike the so-called oldest image of Mary, it does not form part of a tomb decoration. Instead it appears in a very prominent position on the central arch of a chamber known as the Greek Chapel **(Fig 33).**[165] The details of the painting are now hard to discern and although the figures appear to be wearing short tunics and headwear, it is impossible to claim that they are dressed in the same manner as the later depictions of the magi. All we can really be sure of is that each figure was painted in a different colour and they are holding an object using both hands with their arms extended towards the seated figure they are approaching.[166]

Judging by the drape of the tunic and the shape of the head, the seated figure is female. Her right arm is bent at the elbow and set slightly apart from her body, whereas the left arm appears to be resting in her lap. The only indication that she may also be holding a child on her lap is a dark circle of paint on the left side of her breast that could be said to form part of the child's head. Although her high back chair is portrayed in profile, the upper part of her body is twisted to the right so that she appears to facing towards the viewer rather than the approaching figures.

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[164] Origen is said to have delivered this homily in Caesarea sometime between 238 and 244. See Origen's Genesis Homily XIV in Heine, R.E., *The Fathers of the Church Volume 71: Origen Homilies on Genesis & Exodus*, 196-202.

[165] The Greek Chapel is a large chamber ending in three niches that form a kind of choir that may have been used for liturgical gatherings. It was given the name *Cappella Greca* because of the two inscriptions in Greek painted on the surface of a burial niche in the second section of the chapel. Carletti, S., (2005) (trans. Mulhern, A.) *Guide to the Catacombs of Priscilla*, 2, 4; Kirsch, G.P., (1927) *The Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome*, 17-22.

[166] Tolotti, F., (1970), *Il cimitero di Priscilla*; De Bruyne, L., (1970) 'La Cappella greca di Priscilla', in *RAC* 46, 291-330.

A slightly later version of a similar scene can be found in the catacomb of Domitilla. Painted on to the white plaster wall set between two loculi this fresco depicts a seated woman with a childlike figure on her lap being approached from left and right by two sets of figures bearing gifts and dressed in tunics, leggings, cloaks and caps.[167] The woman, who is portrayed frontally, wears a simple white *dalmaticus* decorated with two vertical stripes (**Fig 34).**[168] Her head covering is unusual, unlike the more traditional palla that would have been pulled up to cover the head, or the elegant and fashionable diaphanous veils that revealed the contours of the hair as seen in (**Fig 21)**, this woman appears to be wearing a veil in an opaque material. It is set back from her forehead so that the front part of her hair is exposed, but rather unusually it falls only as far as her shoulders. Rossi's engraving of the tomb reproduced in Northcote and Brownlow's *Roma Sotterranea* (**Fig 35**) shows additional elaborate scrollwork around the edges of the two loculi.

In an arch above an arcosolium within the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus is another early Adoration painting. This has been dated by Rossi to the later part of the third century and it shows a woman seated in a high back chair holding a child in the crook of her left arm.[169] Only two magi approach, both of whom carry a large dish as an offering (**Fig 36**). Like the woman from the Domitilla tableau, this woman is also dressed in white striped *dalmaticus*, but her head is uncovered. Although the head and face of the figure on her lap is still visible, part of the surface

[167] The reason for an additional magus has been explained in the past as an artistic device used 'in order to complete the picture and fill the space'. Appell, J.W., *Monuments of Early Christian Art 'Sculptures and Catacomb Paintings'*, 54. Northcote and Brownlow claim that this fresco shows evidence of an original sketch in which only three figures feature. They suggest that the artist decided to 'sacrifice historic truth to the exigencies of his art'. Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma Sotterranea* Vol. 2, 171.

[168] This is the only example of a frontal depiction of this scene from the catacombs. Croom, A.T., (2002) *Roman Clothing & Fashion*, 82-85; Norris, H., (2002) *Church Vestments: Their Origin and Development*, 43.

[169] Northcote and Brownlow (1879), 171.

of the fresco is damaged and so it is difficult to make out where the lower half of the child's body once sat (**Fig 37**).

Looking at these three early examples it is clear that the only details that tally with the Matthean story are the men bearing gifts and the woman and childlike figure. Inexplicably, the two most important elements of the story are missing: no star is depicted anywhere in these scenes and the men are not kneeling to pay homage. Instead, the artists appear to have created a set of alternative narrative details such as a seated Mary, Jesus as a child rather than a newborn and a specific style of dress for the magi. Their caps, belted tunics, leggings and capes follow the Roman artistic tradition of depicting 'barbarians' from the eastern borders of the empire. A contemporary example of this can be found on the victory arch of Septimius Severus built to commemorate the emperor's defeat of the Parthians **(Fig 38**).[170]

Tribute and acknowledgement of power were familiar themes within Roman art. From the early Republican era they had been used as propaganda tools to make much of moments of triumph.[171] The idea that an imperial triumphal ceremony

[170] Ferris, I.M., *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians through Roman Eyes,* 120. Parthia formed part of the ancient Persian Empire. The distinctive hat of both the Parthians and the magi is often referred to as Phrygian although Phrygia was a region in Anatolia. In classical art the Phrygian cap was used as a device to show that the hero or god was not of Greek origin, as in the Trojan Paris, and the eastern gods and mythological figures of Orpheus, Attis and Mithras. Carpenter, T.H., (1998) *Art & Myth in Ancient Greece*, 235. Salvadori also makes the point that unlike the defeated Parthians the magi have neither long hair nor unkempt beards, a look that was regarded as both uncouth and uncivilised by the Romans, Salvadori, (2002), 296. Another puzzling occasional addition to the scene is the male figure stranding behind the seated woman (Figs 56 and 63). He appears in a handful of sarcophagi carvings featuring the Adoration and has been described as Balaam, a generic figure of an Old Testament prophet and even Joseph, although the Joseph identification has been rejected by most scholars. Salvadori, 285 n.28.

[171] Roman generals staged elaborate triumphal processions that included paintings of battles or allegorical scenes depicting the personifications of vanquished countries paying tribute to Rome. These paintings were commissioned to let ordinary Romans know how successful their generals were, but also to endorse and implement the ideology of the state as well as introducing them to peoples and cultures from newly conquered regions. The seminal work on the use of art as a propaganda tool in the Augustan era is still Zanker, P., (1990) *The Power of Images in the Age of*

may have been the original inspiration for the Adoration became especially popular during the early part of the twentieth century. Indeed several scholars went as far as to suggest that the Adoration scene was purposely developed as a propaganda device showing the submissive eastern magi paying tribute to an imperial Christ.[172] Nowadays scholars are far more reserved about making such a definite interpretation.[173]

The popularity of the Adoration imagery on sarcophagi carvings developed from the end of the fourth century, when the arrival of the magi became part of the Christian festal calendar.[174] Whether this feast celebrated the birth, Adoration or baptism of

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Augustus. It has also been suggested that an actual historical event of imperial tribute may have inspired Matthew's writings. The event chronicled by Pliny in his *Natural History* was the visit to the Emperor Nero of the Armenian prince Tiridates in 66AD. Nero conferred the throne of Armenia on the prince and in the course of the ceremony Tiridates knelt before the emperor and declared that he would pay Nero homage as he did to Mithras. Brown, R.E., (1999) *The Birth of the Messiah*, 174; Holliday, P.J., (1997) 'Roman Triumphal Painting: Its Function, Development and Reception', *AB*, Vol. 79, No. 1, 130-147.

[172] The emperor Augustus instigated the *Adventus Augusti* whereby a welcoming party of praetors, tribunes and consuls would greet him on his return from campaigns. This tradition continued into the reign of Constantine and was commemorated in the imperial coinage with emperors portrayed being greeted by the personification of the country they visited. In 1944, the German scholar Ernst Kantorowicz proposed that this scene had been translated into Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in early examples of Christian art. Kantorowicz, E.H., (1944) 'The "King's Advent": And the Enigmatic panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina', *AB*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 207-231.

[173] This idea was dubbed the 'emperor mystique' by Thomas F. Mathews. He suggested that it was the growth of German imperialism in the lead up to the Second World War rather than clear art historical evidence that influenced this interpretation first proposed by Ernst Kantorowicz, Andreas Alföndi and André Grabar. In his opinion, the early Christians revered Christ not as an emperor but as a magician whose magic was more powerful than any of his pagan rivals. The magi were in effect representatives of powerful Persian magicians acknowledging Christ as the most powerful magician of all. He based this theory on the similarity of the dress of the magi to that of the pagan figures of Orpheus and Mithras, both noted for their magical abilities, and the Old Testament's Daniel with the three youths condemned to the furnace for refusing to worship a pagan idol. He suggested it was no coincidence that images of Daniel and the three youths, often appeared in close proximity to the Adoration scenes in both catacomb and sarcophagi art. Nor that the pagan idol the three youths were being forced to worship sometimes bore the features of a Roman emperor. Mathews, T.F., (1999) *The Clash of Gods*: *A reinterpretation of early Christian art*, 54-91.

[174] The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus provides the first written reference to a Christian feast of the Epiphany in 361when he describes how the pagan emperor Julian pretends to be Christian while still Caesar to Constantius.

> *But to conceal this for a while, on the day of the festival at the beginning of January, which the Christians call Epiphany, he went into their church, and offered solemn public prayer to their God.* Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, XXI.

Stevenson, J., (2000) *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents illustrating the history of the Church*, AD 337-461, 53.

Jesus as well as the miracle at Cana is still unclear. However, the importance of the magi's role as the first gentiles to acknowledge Christ's divinity was unquestioned.

By the fifth century the symbolism of the magi had become popular on all levels. They could be used within the most complicated theological debates but they were equally powerful in less esoteric ways. Fragments from later sarcophagi carving show how the Adoration was used to advertise the tomb occupant's own beneficence to the Church. On one sarcophagus the actual amount of the donation can be seen carved on to one of the magi's offerings while another example includes the figure of the deceased following behind the magi procession (**Figs 39 & 40**).[175]

The magi, with their gift of frankincense, were also seen as intercessors for the dead, whereas the symbolism of a child seated on his mother's lap became especially favoured for children's burials. One example shows the face of the dead child actually superimposed on to the head of Jesus. While in another example the seated woman may bear the features of the dead child's own mother. The pose showing her handing her son into the protective embrace of the first magus appears to have an especially poignant double meaning (**Fig 41**).[176]

Legends began to be woven to explain some of the more difficult aspects of the image, such as, the depiction of the newborn Jesus as a miniature adult. Whereas for some audiences this was obviously symbolic of Christ's divine wisdom and spiritual maturity, other groups may have been more at ease with a literal interpretation. This is perhaps why on some sarcophagi Christ is portrayed as a

[175]Trexler (1997), 17-25.
[176] Ibid.

swaddled baby as well as adding a companion scene of the manger with the ox and ass (**Fig 42**). In fairness Matthew's nativity chronology was unclear and at odds with that of Luke. Although he initially suggested that the magi had arrived soon after the birth of Jesus, he later explained that Herod ordered the killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 'two years old or under, according to the time he had learned from the wise men'.[177]

It is impossible to overestimate the effect the legend of the magi would have on the later development of Marian iconography. By the end of the fifth century the woman of the Adoration had not only turned to face her audience but she had also taken on an identifiable persona and adopted a pose that would become the most

[177] Matthew 2.16. At the height of the Trinitarian controversies towards the end of the fourth century, Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis instigated a vigorous condemnation of all the ideas he considered heretical. In his book known as the *Panarion*, he went to great pains to explain the apparent dating inconsistencies in the birth narratives in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. In the process he created a series of complicated travel arrangements undertaken by Jesus, Mary and Joseph in order to prove a two-year gap between the birth and the arrival of the magi:

> *1.,4 He was born in Bethlehem, circumcised in the cavern, presented in Jerusalem, embraced by Simeon, openly confessed by Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, and taken away to Nazareth.*
>
> *The following year he came to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem, and came to Bethlehem to visit his family, borne in the arms of his mother. Once more he was taken back to Nazareth, and after a second year came to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, borne by his own mother as before. But in Bethlehem he came to a house with his own mother and Joseph, who was old but accompanied Mary. And there, in his second year, he was visited by the magi, was worshipped, received gifts, and was taken to Egypt the same night because of an angel's warning to Joseph. Again he returned from Egypt two years later, since Herod had died and Archelaus had succeeded him*.

Epiphanius makes little of the importance of Mary to the Adoration narrative. This is perhaps surprising as it is also within the *Panarion* that we find evidence of two contemporary heresies being practised that involved Mary. The first Epiphanius calls *Antidicomarianitism* which he describes as an Arabian movement that claimed Mary had intercourse with Joseph after the birth of Christ. The second, also from Arabia, he dubs the *Collyridians* because they are said to have worshipped Mary as a goddess by offering small cakes or collyris to her. Epiphanius dismisses the practice by stating firmly that 'Adoration must cease. For Mary is no goddess nor has she received her body from heaven'. Williams, F., (1994) *The Panarion of St Epiphanius Bishop of Salamis Book II & III*, 33 - 35, 51-52, 601-629. http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/epiphanius.html accessed 22/12/2009.

iconic female image in the history of Christian art.[178] Whether this woman started off her life as a portrait of Mary is a question I attempt to answer in the next chapter.

[178] Jaś Elsner suggests that by the fourth century the Adoration of the Magi imagery had become such a powerful propaganda tool that pagan groups were beginning to use it in their own art. He cites as an example a mosaic found in Nea Paphos in Cyprus. This image shows Hermes with his winged cap enthroned and accompanied by personifications of Theogonia (Divine Birth) and Nectar, presenting the infant Dionyus to a group of Nymphs. He also makes the point that the birth of Dionysus was set on January 6th, the feast later adopted to mark the arrival of the magi. Elsner, J., (1998) *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450*, 220 and Fig. 146.

Chapter 4

A Deconstruction of the Iconography of the Adoration of the Magi.

In the last chapter I followed received wisdom while charting and interpreting the earliest artistic portrayals of the Adoration of the Magi: a reading that by default presents the seated woman as an image of Mary. However, in this chapter I intend to deconstruct the standard reading of the iconography and take a fresh look at the original meaning of the scene and the role of the seated woman. In order to do this I return once again to Lampe's account of a fractionated Rome during the era of Callistus.[179]

In Chapter One I considered how the Callistus catacomb complex had been developed by the bishops of the Via Appia congregation who, according to Lampe, were just one of several rival *ecclesiae* operating in the city. Another group operating in the east of the city was said to have been run by the enigmatic presbyter Hippolytus, who has been variously described as a bishop, martyr and even an anti-pope, although scholars still debate his real identity.[180]

The *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium or* 'Refutation of All Heresies' is one of the chief works attributed to the mysterious Hippolytus. In it the author savagely attacks both

[179] Lampe, P., (2003) *From Paul to Valentinus, Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries.*
[180] Said to have been a former student of Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus appears to have had a prolific writing career, although some of the works once attributed to him are now thought to have been written by other members of his congregation. He has been the subject of a considerable quantity of literature since Johann Döllinger in 1853 first identified him as the author of *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium.* Döllinger, J.J.I., (1876) *Hippolytus and Callistus.* In 1947, Pierre Nautin first argued that the *Refutatio* and other works were not the writings of Hippolytus, but the product of another third century schismatic writer called Josephus Romanus who was also an opponent of Callistus, Nautin, P., (1947) *Hippolyte et Josipe*. The two most recent studies are Cerrato, J.A., (2002) *Hippolytus Between East and West: The Commentaries and the Provenance of the Corpus* and Brent, A., (1995) *Hippolytus and the Roman church in the third century: communities in tension before the emergence of a monarch-bishop.* Both books carry extensive bibliographies of past scholarship.

Callistus, whom he condemns as an ex-slave and thief, and his 'school of theology'. Whether or not Hippolytus was the actual author of this diatribe, it still provides a remarkably revealing insight into the conflicts within the third century Christian communities of Rome (see Appendix One).[181]

The author was obviously outraged that not only had Callistus attempted to swell his congregation by opening the doors of his church to what he calls 'the tares of the city', but also had called his group the Catholic or Universal Church.[182] Indeed, it is clear that in the third century Christianity was still far from becoming a unified belief system. In this climate of conflict it is perhaps rather naïve to suggest that the paintings in the catacombs of Callistus were the early Christians' first random attempts at portraying their unified beliefs and ideology.[183] Jaś Elsner is a staunch opponent of this idea, dubbing it a 'random choice theory'; indeed, he was the first scholar to suggest that the catacomb artists may have been working with a political as opposed to theological brief. Rather than early experiments in Christian art, Elsner believes their choice of images formed part of a carefully designed strategy for defining the church of Callistus' 'sectarian identity'.[184]

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[181] The ten books of the *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* are the most important works attributed to Hippolytus. Book I with the title *Philosophizumena* was found among the works of Origen; Books II and III are lost, and Books IV-X were found, without the name of the author, in the Mount Athos Library in 1841 and identified as the work of Hippolytus in 1851. Brent, A., (1995), 215.

[182] Lampe contends that the reason why orthodoxy, as represented by the Callistians, eventually triumphed over all the other belief systems was it was the simplest to understand. Callistus won over the less educated members of society by offering them an easy route to salvation and free burials. It became the *ecclesia* of choice for the majority leaving the followers of the 'heretics' or rival parties being 'numerically outnumbered'. Lampe, P., (2003), 383.

[183] When Finney first wrote *The Invisible God* in 1994 he admitted that these early examples of Christian art 'consistently evaded concise iconographic interpretations'. Finney, P.C., (1994) *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*, 185-187.

[184] Elsner, J., (2001) 'Cultural Resistance and the Visual Image: The Case of Dura Europos', *Classical Philology*, Vol. 96, No. 3, 269-304, and 'Inventing Christian Rome: the role of Early Christian art' in Edwards, C., & Woolf, G., (eds.) (2006) *Rome the Cosmopolis*, 74. Even though Finney cautions against trying to achieve a balanced assessment of the iconography of the Callistus images, he does still suggest that there is 'a certain thematic unity' in the choice of scenes. The recurrent themes he notes are those of people being delivered from affliction and quite often violent

Alongside the Biblical figures that represented deliverance, salvation and redemption such as Jonah, Daniel, Abraham with Isaac and even Lazarus, other less likely characters made their debuts on the walls of the Callistan catacombs. These were the 'untouchables', characters such as the Samaritan woman at the well and the Paralytic, both outsiders according to the Jewish tradition. I suggest that these figures may well have been included in the repertoire of the catacomb artists in order to advertise the lenient 'open door' policy of Callistus and his church.[185]

Elsner goes one step further with his reading of the conflicting Christian messages by suggesting that the members of the school of Hippolytus had engaged in a similar piece of artistic propaganda. However, rather than using painted images, he maintains that they turned instead to sculpture to represent their community's sectarian identity. More specifically one particular sculpture - a large marble statue of a woman seated on an ornate throne.

Remarkably this statue survives today having been re-discovered in a fragmented state in the sixteenth century. Because it was engraved with a series of inscriptions listing titles of works attributed to Hippolytus it was erroneously restored in his

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death such as Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah, Abraham and Isaac and even what has been interpreted as a scene of the Israelites dying of thirst in the desert. These examples link in with New Testament scenes of deliverance, salvation and redemption subjects such as Lazarus raised from his tomb, the shepherd rescuing his sheep, baptism, the fisherman and the paralytic carrying his bed. Finney, 184-198.

[185] Another symbol that first appears in these catacombs is the bizarre image of Noah popping up out of the ark like a jack in the box, his arms spread out in the orante position as we saw in **(Fig 2).** Noah and his ark, as the author of the *The Refutation of All Heresies* informs us, was regarded by Callistus as a symbol of a Church:

> *that the ark of Noe was made for a symbol of the Church, in which were both dogs, and wolves, and ravens, and all things clean and unclean.* Lampe (2003), 383**.**

likeness (**figs 43 & 44**). However, recent scholarship has unveiled the statue's more feminine side.[186]

I would like to go one step further and suggest that not only was the statue originally female, but that it also played a vital but hitherto unnoticed role in the iconography of the Adoration of the Magi. In order to understand that role we need first to look at the scholarship that followed on from the rediscovery of the 'Hippolytus statue' in the sixteenth century.

The statue was first unearthed in Rome by the Italian antiquarian Pirro Ligorio in around 1551.[187] As it was missing its arms, head and part of its shoulders, Ligorio was initially confused as to its original purpose and seems at first to have assumed that it was female. Two drawings made by him following the discovery show a distinctly feminine torso **(figs 45 & 46).**[188] Superficially, the statue had all the attributes of an enthroned goddess.[189] However, there was one unusual addition: a series of texts inscribed around the seat that could be dated palaeographically to the first half of the third century.[190] The texts included a list of literary works, several of which had been attributed to Hippolytus, which is why Ligorio seems to have had the statue restored to look like Hippolytus despite its obvious female attributes. On

[186] The key pieces of research on this statue were conducted by Margherita Guarducci, who first cast doubt on the true sex of the statue, followed by Allen Brent. Guarducci M., (1991) *San Pietro E. Sant'Ippolito:Storia Di Statue Famose in Vatican*; Brent, A., (1995).

[187] Ligoria claimed he had found the statue in a ruined church between the Via Nomentana and the Via Tiburtina at the Ager Veranus near Castro Pretorio. This places the statue in the vicinity of the cult centre of Hippolytus which was discovered by Rossi at the end of the nineteenth century and would have been unknown by Ligorio. Brent, (1995). 3.

[188] Ligorio's notes and drawings survive in two manuscripts, XIII. B.7. of the National Library of Naples and in J.A.II 10 and III 11 of the Turin State Archives. Some scholars have suggested that all that actually remained of the statue when Ligoria rediscovered it was the chair and a section of the figure's groin. Brent, (1995), 52-53.

[189] Ligorio's drawings bear a striking similarity to a statue unearthed in March 2007 during excavations at Dion in Greece which has been identified as representing either the goddess Hera or Athena. As with the Hippolytus statue the umbilicus is clearly defined. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17406301/ accessed 28/7/2008.

[190] They also included the name of the emperor Alexander Severus who reigned from between 222-235. Brent (1995), 3-9.

one side of the chair, a paschal calendar had also been incised calculating the date of the Passover Festival from 222 until 333 in seven cycles of sixteen years. On the opposite side there was a table following the western system for calculating the corresponding dates for Easter.[191]

Once Ligorio had restored the statue it ended up in the Vatican library where it remained as a tribute to Hippolytus until 1991 when the Italian archaeologist Margherita Guarducci started to question its attribution. After studying the shape and folds of the statue's robe and the hem around its feet, she came to the conclusion that the figure was neither Hippolytus nor indeed male and had instead originally represented a female Epicurean philosopher.[192]

While supporting Guarducci's idea that the statue was that of a woman, the theologian and Hippolytan scholar Allen Brent concluded that it was more likely to have been an allegorical representation than an actual historical figure. Rather than a philosopher, he suggested that it had originally been intended to represent Sophia or Wisdom as part of a representation of the distinctive Logos/Wisdom Christology of the Hippolytans. In his opinion the statue had been sculpted to represent Wisdom enthroned holding a codex symbolising the Logos as the 'word of God', an artwork that would become the 'corporate logo' of the Hippolytan community.[193] As the Hippolytans ran their group in the style of a Greek philosophical school, a statue

[191] The dating of Easter was highly controversial in the third century with Christian communities around the city in conflict over what would become known as the Quartodeciman crisis. Brent suggests that by showing the two different dating systems for Easter the Hippolytans were attempting to work out a compromise between the warring factions in the city. Brent, (1995), 65-66.
[192] She suggested that the leonine features of the feet of the chair were a typical embellishment on statuary depicting Epicurus and his disciples. In her view, the statue was a representation of one of Epicurus' female followers, a woman called Themista of Lampsacus. Brent (1995), 51-76. .
[193] Brent, (1995), 56, 62-76 and 109. Statuary is notable by its absence in the corpus of extant examples of early Christian art. Exceptions to this rule include the controversial Cleveland Marbles, dated to the third century. Although many dispute their authenticity, this collection includes four statuettes of Jonah and one of the Good Shepherd. See Elsner (2003), 118 n. 24.

that symbolised their brand of philosophical thought would have been entirely in keeping with their ideas.[194]

It is also apparent that the female identity of Wisdom played a prominent role within the writings of Hippolytus. In his commentary *On Proverbs* he describes Wisdom as 'the mother of Christ', when he explains the meaning of the line 'The eye that mocketh at his father, and dishonours the old age of his mother' from Proverbs 30:17, in the following way:

> *…….one that blasphemes God and despises the mother of Christ, the wisdom of God,—his eyes may ravens from the caves tear out, i.e., him may unclean and wicked spirits deprive of the clear eye of gladness; and may the young eagles devour him: and such shall be trodden under the feet of the saints.*[195]

Although at first sight the Hippolytans' statue appears to be an unlikely link with Marian imagery, I believe that it actually holds the key to understanding how her iconography developed and we need to return once again to the Adoration imagery to uncover the link. It is, I suggest, no coincidence that the earliest example of the Adoration imagery can be found in the catacomb of Priscilla, located just a few miles northeast of the Castro Pretorio where the Hippolytan statue was first discovered.[196] In one of the oldest parts of the cemetery is the mysterious *Cappella*

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[194] One of the works listed on the pedestal of the statue is the *Traditio Apostolica.* Although there is some debate as to whether Hippolytus was its author, the work still reflects how well the Hippolytan church was organised.

[195] *ANF* http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iv.i.vi.i.html accessed 16/7/2008.

[196] According to Lampe, this catacomb was used by the residents on both sides of the Via Lata/Flaminia. He suggests three focal points in Rome where pre-Constantinian Christian communities were centred: the regions left and right of the inner city section of the Via Appia that included the catacomb of Callistus; the Trastevere area and the region left and right of the Via Lata/Flaminia that included a section of Mars Field. Lampe, 38.

Graeca or Greek Chapel that forms part of a large underground area known as the Cryptoportico that once formed part of a villa built above ground. The chapel appears to have been designed to be used for religious ceremonies and is generally dated to the late second or early third century.[197]

On the right wall of this part of the chapel are two inscriptions in Greek from which the Chapel got its name:

> *Obrimos Palladio/Glykytato Anepsio Synskolaste Mnemes Karen*
> *(Obrimo to his most charming cousin and fellow student, Palladio, remembered with affection and:*
> *Obrimos Nestoriane/Makaria Glykytate/Simbio Mnemes Karin*
> *(Obrimo, to his sweetest wife Nestoriana, remembered with love*).[198]

The description *synskolaste* is a telling epitaph that appears to suggest that Obrimo and Palladio were part of the same *ecclesia* school. The Greek Chapel certainly has the appearance of a place of worship, it is a long rectangular chamber divided by a large arch, with another smaller arch on top of a central niche at the far end of room. The walls and the upper parts of the arches are decorated with frescoes and a low stone bench runs along the side of one wall.[199] The rest of the decoration is

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[197] Carletti, S., (2005) (trans. Mulhern, A.) *Guide to the Catacombs of Priscilla,* 24-31. As Lampe points out, the dating battle over the chapel is intense ranging between the 190s through to the late third century. Lampe, 36, n.55. See also Styger, P., (1933) *Die römischen Katakomben***,** 100-45; Tolotti, F., (1978) 'Le cimetière de Priscilla. Synthèse d'une recherché' *RHE* 73, 306-307; Snyder, G.F., (2003) *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine,* 157.

[198] Hippolytus is said to have been one of the last of the Church leaders to write in Greek whereas Zephyrinus and Callistus had followed in the tradition set by their predecessor Victor who had attempted to Latinize his Church. However, Greek was not completely abolished as a liturgical language until the fourth century. Lampe, 144.

[199] The ceiling vault appears to have once contained a series of images described as 'cosmic themes and signs'. Nicolai, V.C; Bisconti, F., and Mazzoleni, D., (2002) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome,* 84.

completed by stuccowork and panels of fake marble painted on the lower portions of the wall. The frescoes depict some of the earliest examples of Biblical scenes that would later become standard iconography within the catacombs, such as Moses striking the rock and bringing forth water and the three youths in the fiery furnace (**Fig 47**).

The archways of the chapel are also richly decorated and on the central span is the earliest depiction of the Adoration described in some detail in Chapter Three. As we have already seen, although it is universally regarded as the oldest portrayal of the Adoration, the painted scene on the central arch of the chapel displays little in its composition that immediately links it with Matthew's description of the arrival of the magi (**Fig 48**). There is no indication of a place or setting for the scene, no star and although the figures appear to be carrying gifts or offerings they are not kneeling, indeed even though the woman is seated, there is no indication of a house. Even this early in the development of Christian art it was normal for artists to include buildings to contextualise the paintings, as with Lazarus and his tomb and Susanna in her garden.[200]

In my opinion the reason for these omissions was that the scene was designed not as a depiction of the Adoration but as a representation of the Hippolytans' Wisdom statue with the three figures paying tribute as an acknowledgement of the supremacy of the Logos/Wisdom Christology over the teachings of the many other rival schools across the city. This was an immensely powerful image that symbolised how the Hippolytans saw their *ecclesia* at the time the chapel was

[200] Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne suggests that the reason the magi are not kneeling in the early depictions of the Adoration is because the scene is meant to show their arrival rather than adoration. Unfortunately this explanation still does not account for the absence of the star. Lafontaine-Dosogne, J., (1975) 'The Cycle of the Infancy of Christ' in Underwood, P., (eds.) *Studies in the Art of Kariye Djami*, 221, 155n.

decorated. They regarded themselves as a church/community under attack as can be seen from the narrative scenes of Susanna on the walls beneath the arch. However, they were confident that their Wisdom/Logos Christology was the true way - hence the scene of the Eucharist meal on the far arch with the veiled figure, who I suggest symbolised Wisdom, taking a prominent place in the celebration (**Fig 49**).[201] We also have a clue as to how this scene may have later been developed to symbolise the Adoration, thanks to a surviving homily from Origen, a writer highly attuned to the concept of allegory.[202]

In his *Commentary on Genesis* Origen links the magi of the Adoration with the Old Testament story of Isaac and the Philistine king Abimelech. The king, together with two members of his court had come to seek reconciliation with Isaac whom Origen describes as representing Christ. He suggests that Abimelech and his retainers:

> C*an indeed represent the magi who come from parts of the East learned in the books of their fathers and in the instruction of their ancestors…*[203]

He also describes the men as representing philosophy in its three aspects - logic, physics and ethics. Expanding his allegory even further, Origen goes on to suggest that Abimelech and Isaac's conflicts symbolized the similarly rocky relationship between Christianity and Philosophy.[204]

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[201] This scene is commonly known as the *Fractio Panis*. Because of the presence of a veiled woman in the centre of the banquet the fresco was used as evidence for the presence of women priests in the early Church. Irvin, D., (1980) 'The ministry of women in the early church: the archaeological evidence', *Duke Divinity School Review*, 45, 76-86.

[202] Origen's writing style bears such a close similarity to that of Hippolytus that the work of the two authors has in the past often been confused. Heine, R.E., (2002) *The Fathers of the Church: Origen Homilies Vol. 71 on Genesis and Exodus*, 13-14. For a thorough analysis of the work of Origen see Trigg, J.W., (1998) *Origen*. On his use of allegory see Hanson, R.P.C., (1959) *Allegory and Event*

[203] Origen, *Genesis Homily XIV* 3-4. Heine, 196-202.

[204] Ibid.

Origen is said to have preached his homily on Genesis in Caesarea sometime between 238 and 244. Although this dating appears to postdate the decoration of the Greek Chapel, I propose that he may have been inspired to develop this allegory after listening to the preaching of Hippolytus during his visit to Rome 20 years earlier. Origen left Alexandria for Rome around 215, apparently feeling stifled by the rulers of the Alexandrian church. It has been suggested that he made the trip because he wanted to hear the numerous philosophers in the city and perhaps even to establish himself in what he thought would be a freer intellectual environment.[205] In the end, he stayed only two years in Rome, but during that time he is said to have met Hippolytus and heard him preach. On his return to Alexandria, he started to write his *Commentary on Genesis*, but his use of allegory in the creation story caused an irreparable rift in his relationship with Demetrius the bishop of Alexandria.[206]

Returning once again to the Adoration painting in the Greek Chapel, it is interesting to note that the three approaching figures have been painted in different solid blocks of colour, an unusual technique within catacomb painting. It is clear that the artist wanted to mark out their individuality and if they were indeed intended to represent the three aspects of philosophy, then these colours may have been used to differentiate between the three concepts.

Although I believe that the original meaning of this tableau was the supremacy of the Wisdom/logos theology, it is clear that it also came to represent a secondary

[205] Nautin, P., (1947), 365, 418. Eusebius suggests that he made the trip because he wanted to see the Church of the Romans. Heine, 12.
[206] Brent,(1995), 203, 538.

more literal scriptural meaning, that of the arrival of the magi.[207] As we have already seen, Hippolytus described the *Wisdom of God* as the *mother of Christ* in his *Commentary on Proverbs,* perhaps already making an allegorical link with the story of the Adoration.

I believe that over the next few decades, the structure of this tableau evolved with the Logos being transformed from a book into the symbol of the humanity of Christ, a miniature figure seated in Wisdom's lap. This change in imagery may have been instigated as a reaction to the Trinitarian and Christological controversies that were dividing the Christian communities within the city. The need to emphasise the incarnation of Christ in human form appears to have given rise to the curious adoption of a miniature Jesus. This is clearly not Christ newly born but a fully formed diminutive adult figure, an artistic conceit that was also used in the depictions of Christ's baptism, another highly controversial scene in the life of Christ (**Fig 50**).[208]

The battle between the Hippolytans and the Callistans continued even after the death of Callistus in 222, during which time Hippolytus was supposedly elected as

[207] Robin Jensen makes the point that the intellectual tradition of the early church presumed different levels of interpretation of sacred texts. 'These levels would have been presented in ascending orders of complexity, analogous to the spiritual and intellectual ability of the reader or audience'. Jensen, R.M., (2004) *The Substance of Things Seen: Art Faith and the Christian Community*, 27-50. Origen claimed that within the Scriptures there were three levels of meaning that corresponded to the threefold division of a person into body, soul and spirit. The bodily level was the Scripture; the psychic level corresponded to the soul while the spiritual was the highest level that dealt with 'unspeakable mysteries'. Trigg, J.W., (1998), 120-121,126.

[208] Hippolytus in his *Refutation of All Heresies* condemns the belief that Jesus only became Christ after baptism. Book VII. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/hippolytus9.html accessed 21/6/2008. There is some dispute as to why Jesus is shown naked and in miniature in the baptismal scenes. Some scholars have suggested that it was in order to emphasise the need for infant baptism. Robin Jensen suggests it symbolises the idea that baptismal candidates were regarded as newly born. Jensen, R.M., (2000) *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 176. It is interesting to note that initially the feast of the Epiphany on January 6th commemorated the baptism rather than the Adoration.

rival Pope.[209] He is said to have finally reached a rapprochement with Callistus' successor Pontian in around 235 after both men had been exiled to Sardinia by Emperor Maximinus Thrax. The ending of hostilities seems to have signaled the first step in the development of a unified Roman Church. Indeed the *Liber Pontificalis* suggests that during the 240s Pontian's successor Pope Fabian made substantial inroads into developing the structure for a Church hierarchy.[210]

In spite of these efforts, the newly merged Church was still faced with substantial challenges from the many other 'heretical' groups operating across the Roman empire and so it is understandable that it would have sought to present a strong and unified message to its congregation both verbally and visually.[211] I suggest that, over time, confusing or contradictory images such as the Wisdom statue of the Hippolytans would have been slowly phased out of the Church's artistic repertory.

However, the Wisdom/Logos image was too powerful a symbol to disappear entirely and I believe that it was absorbed into official Christian imagery via two rather different routes. One led via the Adoration imagery to the development of the iconic image of the enthroned Virgin and Child. The other led to the cathedra or bishop's throne, even today one of the most powerful symbols of Christian authority around the world.

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[209] Brent challenges the idea that Hippolytus was an anti-pope by pointing out that the move towards a monarchical episcopate only started to develop from around 235. He also suggests that the reason why scholars have previously suggested an earlier date for a unified church is because both Jerome and Damasus had felt compelled to re-write the history of the development of the Church in order to emphasis an unbroken line of apostolic succession. In the process of this re-writing they suggested that Hippolytus had been a schismatic who finally reconciled himself with the Church when in fact he had been the leader of one of several disparate communities within Rome, Brent, (1995), 456.

[210] Both men died in exile and their bodies were said to have been brought back to Rome by Pope Fabian (236-250), Pontian was buried in the catacomb of Callistus whereas Hippolytus was interred in a cemetery on the via Tiburtina. Fabian is said to have divided the city into seven regions each under the supervision of a deacon and sub-deacon. Unfortunately, his work was cut short when he was martyred during the Decian persecutions. Davis, R., (2000) *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715,* 8.

[211] After the martyrdom of Fabian, the Church was divided by the rivalry between Novatian and Cornelius. Duffy E., (2006) *Saints and Sinners – A History of the Popes*, 13-23.

From Chapter Six I trace Mary's journey as her imagery begins to evolve from the Hippolytans' Wisdom figure to enthroned Mother of God. This would be a tortuous route, fraught with politics, doctrinal disputes and power struggles, all of which had a profound effect on her visual persona. Chapter Five is taken up with the curious and confusing history of the seat of Wisdom.

Chapter Five

From Solium to Cathedra – Wisdom, Mary and the Seat of Power

In Chapter Four I proposed that the earliest images of the Adoration started off life as depictions of the Hippolytan symbol of a seated Wisdom figure with the Logos/Christ figure on her lap. Taking that idea one step further, I suggest that the imagery of this tableau may have evolved over several different stages.

At first, as in the fresco from the catacomb of Priscilla (**Fig. 33**), Logos/Christ was depicted in the form of a book or codex held by the seated Wisdom. The figures paying homage to Wisdom and Logos were intended to represent the three aspects of Philosophy, acknowledging the supremacy of Christianity. Over time the Logos became transformed from a book into the symbol of the humanity of Christ, a miniature philosopher figure seated on Wisdom's lap. At this point the images of Philosophy began to take on the identity of the magi depicted wearing the dress of men from the East. Wisdom herself absorbed the identity of Hippolytus' 'Mother of Christ' and the tableau became a visual depiction of the story of the Adoration of the Magi.[212]

This multiplicity of meaning meant that throughout the third century and fourth centuries the Adoration scene became increasingly popular as it appealed to so many different sections of the Christian community. Indeed, as we saw in the last

[212] Using Robin Jensen's description of the three types of exegesis corresponding to three levels of biblical interpretation, we can see the literal and historical level as the narrative story of the arrival of the magi; the moral/typological level as the representation of Christianity dominance over all other religious beliefs and philosophies and the allegorical and spiritual level of the superiority of Wisdom and Logos acknowledged by Philosophy. Jensen, R.M., (2004) *The Substance of Things Seen: Art Faith and the Christian Community*, 34.

chapter, from the early fourth century it became one of the most favoured scenes on sarcophagi reliefs. Yet despite its popularity, I do not believe that the figures that formed part of the tableau were ever regarded as anything more than an allegorical symbol of a belief system.

A severely mutilated catacomb fresco of a typical Adoration scene provides clear evidence that the figures of the mother and child could not have been viewed as holy images (**Fig 51**).[213] At some point after the fresco had been painted on to the wall of the cubiculum, a large loculus was hacked through the wall completely destroying the heads of the seated woman and child (**Fig 52**). It is hard to believe Christian grave diggers would have been quite so cavalier with their pickaxes had the scene been acknowledged as a portrait of Jesus and Mary.[214]

However, although the woman and child figures have been mutilated, it is still possible to discern the outline of their solid high backed chair, an essential prop in all depictions of the Adoration. Superficially this is a fairly unimpressive piece of furniture and yet I believe it offers us another vital clue as to the original meaning of the Adoration imagery.

As we saw in Chapter Three, the idea that an imperial triumphal ceremony may have been the original inspiration for the Adoration became especially popular

[213] See fig 37 with caption in Stevenson, J., (1978) *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of early Christianity*, 66.

[214] In the fourth century many Christians believed that if they were buried close to a martyr then the saint would guide them to heaven and act as their intercessor. Grave diggers were often paid considerable sums of money to find suitable sites throughout the catacombs. Brown, P., (1981) *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chapter 2; Stevenson, J., (1978), 38-39.

during the early part of the twentieth century.[215] When this theory was first challenged by Thomas Mathews, he presented two pieces of evidence in order to discredit the idea that the seated woman and child were enthroned in an imperial style.[216]

Firstly, he pointed out that in many of the early Adoration scenes, far from being enthroned, the woman and child were seated on a high-backed wicker chair, which he described as an example of 'common, inexpensive domestic furniture' (**fig 53**). He also made the point that the Roman emperor never sat on a throne but used instead a *sella curulis* or curule seat for his imperial duties **(fig 54**).[217]

While I agree that the original Adoration scenes had no link with imperial iconography, I contend that this style of seat was more than just a piece of inexpensive domestic furniture. In fact, I suggest that it had a complex and highly symbolic meaning that in the context of the development of Marian art merits careful unravelling.

Although few examples of Roman furniture, even from the late antique period, have survived, via literary descriptions and artistic depictions scholars have been able to construct a very basic idea of what furniture Romans favoured. A recent study on Roman woodworking suggests that the two most elaborate and high status chairs were the *cathedra* and *solium*. The *cathedra* appears to have evolved from the Greek *klismos*, which was an elegant backed chair with curved legs that was

[215] See Chapter Three.
[216] See Mathews, T.F., (1999) *The Clash of Gods*: *A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, 54-91.
[217] This was a folding stool with 'S' curved legs, possibly of Etruscan origin and thought by the Romans to have been the seat used by Romulus the first king of Rome. Mathews, T.F., (1999), 83,104-108.

initially used almost exclusively by women. Examples of the *klismos* can be found depicted on Greek vase paintings and grave stelae from as early as the fifth century BC (**Fig 55**).[218] At some point, between then and the first century AD, the *klismos/cathedra* became adopted by men of learning such as teachers, philosophers, poets and playwrights and came to symbolise their wisdom and erudition (**Fig 56**). Because of this link between the seat and the wisdom of its occupant, *cathedra* also became the term used to describe high status teaching posts. These were known then as they are today as 'professorial chairs', positions much sought after in the second and third centuries AD.[219]

The *solium's* origins and use are less easy to unravel and it has been suggested that the name itself referred to two types of high-backed chair with armrests. Although sharing some basic features the two pieces of furniture looked entirely different. The first (**Fig 57**) was a more substantial version of the *cathedra* with solid but elegantly carved cylindrical legs often with animal or claw motifs. This was the style of seat on which gods or mythological kings and queens were often portrayed. The other style of *solium* can better be described as a rather less ostentatious tub chair and examples of this design can be found carved out of stone in Etruscan burial chambers dating as far back as the sixth century BC (**Fig 58**).[220]

[218] Ulrich, R. B., (2007) *Roman Woodworking*, 215.
[219] Juvenal in his 'Seventh Satire' bemoans the decline in the profitability of learning and letters and refers to a *cathedra* in the context of a *paenituit multos uanae sterilisque cathedrae* translated as 'professor's vain and unprofitable chair'. Humphries, R., (1958) (trans.) *The Satires of Juvenal*, 91-101. Because the teachers and philosophers uttered their words of wisdom while seated in their chairs, the term *ex cathedra* was coined to indicate a declaration made by someone in supreme authority. Rich, A., (1849) *The Illustrated Companion to the Latin Dictionary and Greek Lexicon,* 134; Smith, W. A., (1875) *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities,* 257.
[220] As well as stone, this style of *solium* also appears to have been constructed using a wooden frame over which different materials such as leather, wicker or even beaten bronze was laid. The wicker style was more popular in the northern parts of the empire. Ulrich, R.B., (2007), 216-217.

It is difficult to discern from textual references in what context the tub *solium* may have been used. It has been suggested that it was the chair of choice for women and the elderly or the *paterfamilia*s when receiving guests or business clients in his home.[221] However, as some sarcophagi sculptors chose to depict God the Father seated on a wicker *solium* (**Fig 59**) it would seem to suggest a highly symbolic meaning even when made from such a humble material. In my opinion the solium's symbolism was derived from a funerary rather than a utilitarian context. Indeed the name itself forms part of a linguistic puzzle that also places it in a funerary setting, as well as a term used for a style of a chair, the word *solium* was also used to describe both a bathtub and a type of sarcophagus (**Figs 60 & 61**).[222] This link with death can be clearly seen in art where *solia* sometimes appear on funerary reliefs that depict the tomb's occupant seated alongside mourning members of the family (**Fig 62**). In such a setting, this type of tub seat appears to elevate the importance of the seated figure so that he or she is transformed from a mere mortal to a revered ancestor.[223]

It may also be that the material used to make the *solia* served a symbolic purpose. Wicker, wood, leather, metal and stone could be interpreted as symbols of the material world offering a bridge between the living and the dead. In fact on some sarcophagi God sits upon a worldly wicker solium as he creates Adam and Eve, the wicker perhaps indicating the earthly aspect of the act (**Fig 59**). It is striking also that his *solium* is covered by a veil, a clear separation between the divine and the

[221] This use is proposed by Jones, P.V., and Sidwell, K.C., (1997) *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture*, 220.
[222] This semantic overlap appears to have had its roots in ancient Greece where Aristotle's famous bath also seems to have doubled as his coffin. Lightfoot, J.L., (2000) 'Partheniana Minora' in *CQ*, New Series, Vol. 50, No. 1, 303-305.
[223] D'Ambra, E., (1995) 'Mourning and the Making of Ancestors in the Testamentum Relief' in *AJA* Vol. 99, No. 4, 667-681.

material. The Adoration scene carved on the same sarcophagus shows the woman and child seated on an uncovered wicker *solium*, (**Fig 53)** whereas on another sarcophagus (**Fig 63**) both *solia* are veiled, perhaps indicating the thin line between Christ's divine and human natures.

Within the chambers of the Coemeterium Maius are several similarly designed stone tub seats carved directly out of the tufa rock (**Fig 64**). When they were first discovered in the nineteenth century archaeologists decided that they had been used by presbyters to preach to Christian groups hiding in the cemetery. However, scholars now suggest that along with stone benches, tables and stools also found in the catacombs, they were constructed to be used during funerary meals. However, unlike the benches and stools, these seats were not intended to be sat on but instead symbolised the invisible presence of the deceased during the banquets.[224] This revised interpretation appears to support the idea that not only did the *solia* form a key part of the Roman cult of the dead, but they were never intended to be sat on by the living.[225]

[224] The chairs may have been linked with the festival of the *Feralia* that continued well into the Christian era. Forming part of the annual *Parentalia* it was a public celebration of the dead when food was taken to the family tombs for *refrigerium* banquets. On the final day of the festival on February 22nd families would hold their own private banquets known as *Caristia* or *Cara cognatio*, in which a chair was always left empty to represent the *manes*, the spirits of the dead ancestors. Toynbee, J.M.C., (1996) *Death & Burial in the Roman World*, 51-52, 63-64 & 97; Davies, J., (1999) *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* 145-146; L. and R.A., Adkins, (1999) *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*, 281-282. It is not clear what type of seat was used in this ceremony.

[225] Snyder, G., (2003), *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, 156; Nicolai, V.C; Bisconti, F., and Mazzoleni, D., (2002) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 44-47; Jensen, R.M., (2000) *Understanding Early Christian Art* 55-56; Stevenson, J., (1978), 96-97; Fasola, U.M., (1961) 'La regione delle cattedre nel Cimitero Maggiore', *RAC* 37, 237-267. The tradition of commemorative funerary meals eaten alongside tombs of dead relatives and friends was continued by the Christians up until as late as the sixth century. It is also interesting to note that the symbol of the empty chair has also been found inscribed on to a tomb slab in the catacomb of Praetextatus. See also Salvadori, S.M., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, 32.

The archaeologists who first unearthed the carved seats in the Coemeterium Maius dubbed them *cathedrae,* even though they bore little resemblance to the elegantly carved high-backed chairs we saw in (**Figs 55 & 56**). They apparently used this term because of the chairs' similarity to the stone bishops' thrones that in turn were said to have given their name to the great medieval cathedrals of France and England.[226]

By this time it was common practice to refer to the magnificent marble bishop thrones as *cathedrae* and indeed Walter Lowrie dedicates two pages to a description of this type of seat in his first version of *Christian Art and Archaeology* published in 1901. He writes that within the early churches the presbyters sat on stone benches set in a semicircle around the wall of the apse while the bishop sat in the middle on a stone *cathedra*. In order to give what he calls 'greater distinction to this seat' it was sometimes set into a niche in the apsidal wall and raised several steps higher than the benches. He goes on to suggest that during the first five centuries one type of *cathedra* seemed to have been universal and that was a solid armchair with a high rounded back carved out of a single block of marble adding that 'the famous statue of S. Hippolytus furnishes an early example of such a *cathedra*'.[227]

Lowrie was not the first person to have confused the names of the two types of chairs, since as early as the sixth century stone *solia* had begun to be referred to as both bishops' thrones and *cathedrae*. In reality the early churches of Rome had contained both types of chair: the *cathedra,* which was an elegantly carved and very portable wooden seat upon which the bishop sat and which also gave its name to his

[226] Lowrie, W., (1901) *Christian Art and Archaeology*, 172-174.
[227] ibid.

authority and wisdom, and the *solium*, a monumental tub shaped seat carved from stone and often set into the wall of the apse (**Fig 65).**[228]

In order to understand how the use of these seats may have originated, we need to look at the pre-Christian basilica as the architectural inspiration for Rome's first churches. Originally built as a public hall, basilicas were rectangular in shape and divided by rows of columns into a nave with side aisles. At the far end of the basilica, it was traditional to have a semi-circular apse furnished with stone benches built into the wall with a high-backed marble seat set in the middle.[229] Although the basilica was a civic building, it did also have a religious element. The emperor would sit in state and dispense justice, and even if he himself was not in attendance then his divine effigy would always be present.[230]

As with the so-called bishop's *cathedra*, it is generally assumed by scholars that the marble throne in the apse of the imperial basilicas would have been occupied by the emperor. However, as Mathews points out, the emperor was never enthroned but sat instead on the less ostentatious *sella curulis*, a seat also used by consuls and magistrates who deputised for the emperor.[231] The purpose of the marble throne was, I believe, a very practical one, in the absence of the emperor, magistrates were given the power to represent the imperial legal and administrative authority.

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[228] Stone seats built into the apse were certainly highly prominent within early church architecture and similar seats were said to have existed within Rome's first Christian churches, the Basilica Constantiniana at the Lateran and the Basilica of St Peter's.

[229] Krautheimer, R., (1967) 'The Constantinian Basilicas' *DOP* Vol. 21, 115-140 ; Krautheimer, R., (1986) *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 39-70;

[230] For a detailed analysis of the imperial cult see Fishwick, D., *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies* and Price, S.R.F., (1984) *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Also Beard, M., North, J., and Price, S., (eds.) (1998) *Religions of Rome Vol. 1* and Elsner, J., (1998) *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450*. The religious aspect of the building became so integral to its construction that Jewish masons were forbidden by the Talmud from working on the building of a basilica. Krautheimer (1967), 115-140.

[231] Mathews (1999), 83,104-105.

However, the divine aspect of the emperor could not be replicated, so instead it was symbolised by the empty marble *solium*.[232]

A similar symbolism could have been easily absorbed into the architecture of the new Christian basilica churches. The bishop would have occupied a portable wooden *cathedra* while the stone *solium* was left empty, save for a set of scriptures, in order to represent the divine identity of Christ the Logos.[233] In effect the stone *solium* with the scriptures on its seat became an abbreviated and simplified version of the Hippolytans' Adoration scene.

This interpretation becomes even more compelling when we consider a tradition that appears to have developed within near contemporary Jewish synagogues uncovered in Israel and Greece.[234] Stone seats that have been dubbed the *seat of Moses* from a phrase found in Matthew 23:2-4, have been uncovered within three of the sites (**Fig 66**).[235] As with the basilica and church *solia* some scholars have

[232] It is interesting to note that the mysterious first century AD underground Basilica di Porta Maggiore also appears to have once held a stone throne in the centre of a semicircular apse. The basilica may have been a cult shrine see Bagnani, G., (1919) 'The Subterranean Basilica at Porta Maggiore', *JRS* Vol. 9, 78-85; Strong, E., and Jolliffe, N., (1924) 'The Stuccoes of the Underground Basilica near the Porta Maggiore', *JHS* Vol. 44, Part 1, 65-111.

[233] It has been said that John Chrysostom preaching around 398 would hold forth for two hours, not from his *cathedra* in the apse which was the symbol of his teaching and governing authority, but from a second throne placed on the ambo**.** Doig, A., (2008) *Liturgy and Architecture from the Early Church to the Middle Ages*, 54, n.4. For *cathedra* read solium, with the second throne on the ambo being the actual *cathedra.* It is interesting to note that a the ninth century illustration from a manuscript of the *Homilies of Gregory Nazianzus* features just such a throne as a symbol of Christ's presence at the Second Ecumenical Council. Folio 355, Biblothèque Nationale de France. I will be returning to the symbolism of the empty throne in Chapter Ten.

[234] Examples of such a seat have been found in at least three second or third century AD synagogues: one at Hammath near Tiberias and the other Chorazin near Galilee and the other in Delos, Greece.

[235] The phrase can be found in Matthew 23:2-4:

> *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.*

suggested that these seats were sat on by the elders of the congregation. However others maintain that they were used as a form of reading desk for the Torah scroll.[236]

The *cathedra* would become the weapon Roman bishops used in their battle to assert the primacy of their Church over the other Christian communities across the empire. They claimed this right because Peter had been their first bishop who had apparently preached to the city's first Christians while seated on his *cathedra*.[237]

In 251 Cyprian of Carthage makes an early reference to Rome as the home of the '*cathedra* of Peter'.[238]

> *Upon one He builds His Church, and to the same He says after His resurrection, 'feed My sheep'. And though to all His Apostles He gave an equal power yet did He set up one chair, and disposed the origin and manner of unity by his authority. The other Apostles were indeed what Peter was, but the primacy is given to Peter, and* the *Church and the chair is*

[236] The Greek translation of Matthew's Gospel describes the seat as a *cathedra* but I suggest that a similar confusion may have arisen between the two types of chairs, with the Jewish chief elder sitting on a portable wooden '*cathedra* of Moses' while the stone seat was used to house the sacred Torah. Roth, C., (1949) 'The 'Chair of Moses' and its Survivals', *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 81,1001; Renov, I., 'The Seat of Moses' in Orlinksy, H.M., (1981) *Israel Exploration Journal Reader*, 1320-1326; Levine, L.I., (2000) *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 323-27; For a thorough overview see Goodenough, E.R., & Neusner, J., (1988) *Jewish Symbols in the Greco Roman Period*. A more elaborate stone chair set into the wall at the synagogue at Dura Europos has been identified as a seat for the Torah scrolls. Seager, A., (1975) 'The Architecture of the Dura and Sandis Synagogues.' in Gutmann, J., *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology and Architecture,* 158-159.

[237] The extract from the Gospel of Matthew **'**Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church**'** *Matthew* 16.18, was used as evidence to re-enforce Rome's right to the primacy. The legends that surrounded Peter's time in Rome were varied and often contradictory and mostly seem to have originated in the early medieval period. He is said to have stayed, preached and baptised at a variety of sites around the city, these included the villa of Senator Pudens on which the Church of St. Pudenziana is now said to stand, the house of Aquila and Prisca on which the Church of St. Prisca stands and somewhere within the Catacomb of Priscilla.

[238] Duffy, E., (2006) *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes,* 21; Piétri, C., (2002) 'Peter' in Levillain, P., and O'Malley, J.W., *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia,* 1159-1161. The word *cathedra* would be later replaced by the Latin word *sedes* or seat which then became shortened to 'see' or 'holy see'.

shown to be one. And all are pastors, but the flock is shown to be one, which is fed by all the Apostles with one mind and heart. He that holds not this unity of the Church, does he think that he holds the faith? He who deserts the chair of Peter, upon whom the Church is founded, is he confident that he is in the Church? [239]

Although it is likely that Cyprian had intended only a symbolic meaning for his term '*cathedra* of Peter', by the fourth century an actual piece of furniture known as Peter's chair had become not only a holy relic, but also the subject of two feast days. It is interesting to note that rather than stone this was in fact a wooden chair, designed in the style of a traditional *cathedra* (**Fig 67**). The oldest feast, known as the *Cathedra Petri* is still celebrated on the 22nd of February.[240]

The second festival of the *Cathedra Petri* was, up until 1960, celebrated on the 18th of January. This involved a second *cathedra* that was initially said to have been venerated in the Coemeterium Maius and then subsequently at the Catacomb of

[239] Cyprian, 'On the Unity of the Catholic Church', 4-6 (CSEL, III.I.212-1) in Stevenson, J., A. (1990) *New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD337***,** 228-230.
[240] This chair now forms part of one of St Peter's most holy relics encased within a colossal bronze throne created by Bernini in the seventeenth century. It was last examined by Giovanni Battista De Rossi in 1867 who concluded that only the frame in acacia could be dated to the time of Peter. The rest of the chair appears to have been rebuilt in oak as a gift from Charles the Bald to the Pope in 875. Pergolizzi, A.M., (2001) 'San Pietro in Vaticano' in *Roma Sacra: Guide to the Churches in the Eternal City*, 101. The fact that the date of the feast coincided with the *Caristia* was almost certainly part of the Church's attempt at subsuming the pagan elements of the *Parentalia*. The first written reference to the celebration is in 354 in the 'Calendar of Philocalus'. However it was not until the pontificate of Damasus a decade later that the festival appears to have reached the height of its popularity after the Pope had the chair transferred to his new baptistery at the Vatican basilica, Ingraham Kip, W., (1854) *The Catacombs of Rome as Illustrating the Church of the First Three Centuries*, 161; Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R., (1879) *Roma Sotterranea* Vol. 2, 32, 388-399; The date of the 22nd February was also said to have been the anniversary of the day when Peter bore witness to the divinity of Christ by the Sea of Tiberias and also when he was appointed by Christ to be the rock of His Church. Waal, A. (1908). 'Chair of Peter'. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03551e.htm. accessed 29/6/2008.

Priscilla.[241] It is at the Catacomb of Priscilla that Peter is said to have preached and baptised when he first arrived in the city. No ancient *cathedra* has been discovered there although it has been suggested that it once stood in an oratory above the subterranean chambers.

However, what can be found within the catacomb is the mysterious fresco in the chamber of the *Velatio* that was once interpreted as an early depiction of Mary (**Fig 9).** The painting features a seated bishop figure who appears to be performing a religious ceremony while seated on a stone funerary *solium.* Although it can only ever be conjecture, I would suggest that it may have been the image of this seated bishop that went on to inspire the legend of Peter's preaching in the catacombs.

The legend relating to Peter's teaching is hard to date any earlier than the first half of the seventh century and by this time the original significance of the stone *solium* had, I suggest, become overwhelmed by the growing power of the papacy. This in turn had led to the merging of the identities of the *solium* and the *cathedra* combining the two both metaphorically and literally. The bishop now acknowledged as Christ's representative on earth felt justified in taking his place on the stone *solium* which then began to be referred to as a *cathedra*. This change of emphasis can be seen in the tub like design of the famous sixth century ivory and

[241] The legends of the second chair are confusing. De Waal refers to a text from Abbot Johannes dated to around 600 who had been commissioned by Pope Gregory the Great to collect for the Lombard queen Theodolinda, oil from the lamps which burned at the graves of the Roman martyrs. The oils were preserved in individual phials and one was said to have born the inscription: *oleo de sede ubi prius sedit sanctus Petrus* ('oils from the chair where St. Peter first sat'). Waal De, A. (1908) http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03551e.htm accessed 28/7/2008; Kunzler, M., (2001) *The Church's Liturgy,* 442.

wood throne of Maximianus the Bishop of Ravenna. Despite its design the seat is still consistently described as a *cathedra* (**Fig 68**).[242]

Having attempted to unravel the history of the 'Wisdom Seats' in conclusion I propose the following scenario:

In the first part of the third century a powerful school or *ecclesia* in Rome which either followed or included Hippolytus within their group adopted as the insignia of their community a figure that they believed encapsulated the essence of their Christian belief. This figure was a statue of a seated woman holding a book and she was intended to be a personification of Wisdom holding the Logos in the form of a scroll or codex.

This figure followed in the Roman tradition of artistic personification. The concept of allegory had its origins in the classical world and as most Romans were educated in the traditions of classical literature, the use of abstract personifications formed an integral part of their thinking. Indeed personifications were used as part of the imperial propaganda as can be seen on the reverse of coins minted during the imperial era. I will look more closely at this art form in Chapter Seven.

At the point that this statue was created the Christian communities within Rome were operating in a highly fractionated state. Each *ecclesia* or community was keen to claim ascendancy over their rival with the two most important communities being those of Callistus and Hippolytus. The Hippolytans used the personification of

[242] Rodley, L., (1996) *Byzantine Art & Architecture*, 96.

Wisdom and Logos as their 'corporate logo' initially in a sculpted form. However, they also chose to incorporate the design into their wall paintings and I suggest that one of the earliest examples of this usage was the so-called Adoration scene from the Greek Chapel in the catacomb of Priscilla. Rather than a narrative depiction of the Adoration of the Magi, an episode only referred to in the Gospel of Matthew, I suggest that this tableau was initially designed as a triumphal representation. It portrays followers of rival movements acknowledging the supremacy of the Hippolytans' form of Christianity personified as Wisdom holding the Logos.

The Logos was first depicted as a rolled up scroll and then a codex, eventually metamorphosing as a miniature adult/philosopher seated in the lap of Wisdom. Then over time the scene became linked with the Adoration of the Magi with Wisdom identified as the mother of Christ on both an allegorical and a narrative level.

It is important to emphasise at this point that I am not suggesting that the Wisdom figure was also viewed as a personification of *Ecclesia* the Universal Church. As we have already seen, amongst the early Christians of the second and third centuries the word *ecclesia* meant no more than community and was used to describe their distinctive groups or schools. Both writers and catacomb artists appear to have employed different characters from the Bible to symbolise the circumstances surrounding their individual *ecclesia*. Susannah became a figuration of the Hippolytan *ecclesia* at a time when they felt themselves under attack from Jews and pagans and even betrayed by fellow Christians from rival *ecclesiae*. The Callistans on the other hand appear to have used Noah to represent their *ecclesia*,

equating his acceptance of all species into the Ark at a time when they were welcoming what Hippolytus called the 'tares of society' into their *ecclesia*.[243]

By the end of the third century Callistus' open door policy and his comprehensive charity programme inevitably led to his *ecclesia* becoming the largest within the city and ultimately the one described as the Orthodox Church. Lampe suggests that the more philosophical *ecclesiae* were viewed with suspicion by the uneducated Christian folk – 'orthodoxy, easily comprehended by the masses constituted the Great Church'.[244]

This is not the place to enter into a detailed analysis of the different conflicts that assailed the Christian communities in Rome for the next few decades, but suffice to say different factions continued to compete with each other across the city even after Constantine's patronage of Christianity and the cessation of the persecutions in 313.[245] One of the most violent conflicts arose in the middle of the fourth century between two rival bishops Damasus and Ursinus. It lasted for many years leaving hundreds dead and Christian Rome in chaos.[246] Having finally secured the Episcopal throne Damasus set about an orchestrated campaign to achieve Christian unity across the city. In the next chapter I look more closely at how he turned to the cult of the martyrs to help secure this unity, with art forming an important part of his campaign.

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[243] Hippolytus, 'Refutation of all Heresies', 9.12.20-26 in Stevenson, J., A (1990) *New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD337***,** 151-153. The earliest example of an identifiable figure of *Ecclesia* comes from a mosaic in Santa Sabina Church in Rome dated to the first half of the fifth century. I will be analysing this mosaic in more detail in Chapter Eight.
[244] Brent, A., (1995) *Hippolytus and the Roman church in the third century: communities in tension before the emergence of a monarch-bishop*, 398-457; Lampe, P., (2003), *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries***,** 381-384.
[245]Brent, A., (1995) 398-540; Curran, J., (2007) *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century*, 129-42.
[246] Ibid, 143-157.

By this time I believe the majority of the Hippolytans' wisdom statues had either been destroyed or incorporated into the Adoration imagery. However, I suggest that the concept of Wisdom and Logos had not been entirely lost within the artistic repertoire of the time, as can be seen in the decorative scheme of a high status silver reliquary casket discovered under the altar of the church of San Nazaro in Milan.[247] In the context of Marian art this is an especially important artefact. If its date of the late fourth century is accurate then it is both one of the earliest extant examples of a non-funerary depiction identified as the Virgin and Child, and the earliest example of a fully frontal depiction of the holy mother and child outside of the catacombs.[248]

The casket is one of the largest silver reliquaries of the early Christian period measuring 20.5 x 20.5 x 20.6cm and is skilfully embossed, engraved and gilded **(Fig 69).** The overall iconographic programme features scenes from both the Old and New Testaments, none of which appear to follow the conventional artistic repertoire of the period. Nor do they bear any relation to the relics contained inside, which may indicate that the casket was not initially created for this purpose.

The lid of the casket features an image of Christ seated among his apostles **(Fig 70).** He is dressed in the style of a Roman aristocrat with his hair cropped short with a fringe in the fashion of imperial portraits of the late fourth century. He has one arm

[247] The casket was first unearthed in 1578 and then re-discovered in the late nineteenth century. It was so exquisitely decorated that for decades many scholars thought it was a work of the Italian Renaissance. However, modern scientific analysis shows that it is a work of the late fourth century. Morey, C.R., (1919) 'The Silver Casket of San Nazaro in Milan', *AJA* 23, 101-25; Morey, C.R., (1928) 'Review of Richard Delbrueck, Denkmäler spätantiker Kunst', in *AJA* 32, 403-06; Leader-Newby, R.E., (2004) *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity*, 100; Spier, J., (ed.) (2008) *Picturing the Bible*, 259-264.

[248] The Traprain Ewer, a reconstructed silver liturgical vessel dated to the same period, features the more traditional depiction of the Adoration in profile, Spier, J., (2008), 253-255.

raised in the gesture of a philosopher teaching while the other holds a closed book. In the foreground are five containers of bread and six jugs, a reference to the miracles of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish or the Wedding Feast at Cana, with an overall allusion to the Eucharist.

In the front panel of the casket a veiled woman is depicted seated on a high backed cushioned seat with her feet resting on a stool **(Fig 71).** On her lap is a nude child and behind the throne are six standing figures. Approaching the woman and child from either side are two curly haired young men. They both wear a pallium draped over one shoulder in the style of a Greek philosopher and each hold a large oval dish. This scene is usually interpreted as a unique depiction of the Adoration of the Magi even though the two figures are not dressed in the usual eastern costume of the magi.[249] This is a curious stylistic diversion, especially as in the two neighbouring panels the figures portrayed wear the typical magi dress. One of these panels features a scene interpreted as the three youths in the fiery furnace. The men are dressed in Phrygian caps and tunics with their hands raised in prayer while a fourth figure holding a staff and dressed in a simple belted tunic stands between them **(Fig 72).** In the next panel an enthroned figure dressed in the same style of dress as the youths and surrounded by several other similarly dressed figures is being presented with two bound prisoners. This scene has been interpreted as representing Daniel judging the elders who had abused Susanna (**Fig 73**).[250] The final panel of the casket is decorated with a tableau usually interpreted as the judgement of Solomon. In this scene a seated figure dressed in a similar style to Christ, is flanked by two

[249] This scene is sometimes called the 'Adoration of the Shepherds' but no animals are shown and the pallium is not a typical type of shepherd's clothing.
[250] The most recent interpretation of this scene as a representation of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt is unconvincing due to the very distinctive costumes. These are normally associated with Daniel, the magi and the three youths in the furnace. Spier, (2008), 262.

veiled women with the body of a dead child laid between them. Above the women a live naked child is being held between two guards **(Fig 74).**

The most recent interpretation of the unusual iconography of this casket is that it was designed as a celebration of 'the divine majesty of Christ by whose grace the imperial power had been granted'.[251] It could have been commissioned by Ambrose who was bishop of Milan between 340 and 397, Pope Damasus in Rome or even the western Emperor.[252] It is of course impossible to know who actually commissioned the reliquary, but there is no doubt that its iconographic programme is unique and I believe it presents us with one of the last examples of the use of the Wisdom figure in an artistic programme.

With this idea in mind I would like to suggest an alternative reading of the artistic programme. The prominent figure on the reliquary is Christ the teacher on the lid, with the overall theme of the casket linking the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is represented by both Solomon and David and the link with the new Testament comes via the vision of Christ in the Fiery Furnace with the three youths. This unusual Old Testament pre-figuration of Christ appears in Hippolytus' commentary on Daniel.[253]

Beneath the figure of Christ on the lid is a tableau usually interpreted as the enthroned Mary and child with two adoring magi. I have always found this scene stylistically puzzling because it portrays Mary seated frontally, her humble solium

[251] Ibid, 263.
[252] Ibid.
[253] *And he said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." The three youths he thus called by name. But he found no name by which to call the fourth. For He was not yet that Jesus born of the Virgin*. Chap. iii. iv.i.x.iii 1 93 *ANF*. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.html accessed 10/2/2009.

replaced by an elaborate throne, an artistic deviation not repeated again until the sixth century, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Ten. In my opinion this panel was not intended to represent the Adoration. I suggest instead that it was designed as a representation of the essence of Christ as Logos seated in the lap of Wisdom with the figures of Philosophy paying tribute.

When this reliquary was made Mary had still not formed an artistic identity, but the scene does present us with a vision of her future. Within two centuries she will have fully assimilated Wisdom's pose to become the enthroned and majestic Mother of God. In the next chapter I chart the continuation of her journey throughout the fourth century, when initially her importance was eclipsed by the increasing power and popularity of the martyr saints.

Chapter 6

Through a glass darkly – Mary versus the Martyrs.

By the end of the fourth century martyr veneration was at its height in Rome. Many Christians had met a violent end during intermittent persecutions over the previous centuries. Now safely ensconced in heaven with an instant saintly status, they were seen as powerful intermediaries between God and humankind.[254] Intercessor was the role that would ultimately become Mary's prerogative, yet in Rome in the late fourth century she was still notable by her visual absence, her identity apparently overshadowed by the near celebrity status of the Christian martyrs.[255]

Ever desperate for help in securing a place in heaven, Roman Christians clamoured to secure burial sites close to the graves of their favourite saints. Indeed, this need to obtain the intercession of the martyrs far outweighed the importance of preserving the Christian images that adorned the walls of the burial chambers of the catacombs. This was a situation clearly illustrated by the mutilation of the Adoration scene in the catacomb of Domitilla that we saw in Chapter Five (**Fig. 51**).

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[254] The earliest surviving martyrological calendar dates from mid fourth century Rome and consists of thirty six feasts, of which twelve are of bishops and twenty-four are of martyrs. Grig, L., (2004) *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 36.

[255] In Book 10 of the *City of God* Augustine redefined the nature of the true intermediaries between God and men and suggested that martyrs could bind men even closer to God than could the angels. Brown, P., (1981) *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 66. Elsner describes the 'rediscovery or even invention' of local saints as well as 'the manufacture of a plethora of material means by which to advertise their presence'. This included a whole variety of relics and images. Elsner, J., 'Inventing Christian Rome: the role of early Christian art' in Edwards, C., and Woolf, G., (eds.) (2006) *Rome the Cosmopolis*, 71 -100. The most important studies of the early saints are still Brown, P., (1981) *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*); Brown, P., (1982) *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 103-52; see also Brown, P., (1987) 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity', in Hawley, J., (ed.) *Saints and Virtues*, 3-14 and Pietri, C., (1984) 'Les origines du culte des martyrs (d'après un ouvrage récent),' *RAC*, 60, 293-319.

Full scale portraits of saints were beginning to appear on the catacomb walls. One of the most striking of these was a fresco of a woman identified by the inscription *Petronella Mart*, a martyr popularly believed to be St. Peter's daughter. She featured as part of the decoration in a cubiculum in Domitilla dated to around 356. The tomb had been built for a woman called Veneranda, portrayed in the fresco being led to paradise by Petronilla **(Fig. 75)**.[256] This is a significant image, not least because so little is known about the mysterious saint. Yet by the end of the fourth century Petronilla's own tomb, along with scores of other martyr burial sites, had become a hugely important pilgrimage shrine.[257]

However, the catacombs were not the only place that featured martyr art. After the Edict of Milan in 313 had brought the persecutions to an end, Christian images began to appear amongst the more mainstream art of Rome. One of the most popular of these art forms was figured gold glass or *vetri a fondo d'oro*, mass produced glass vessels decorated with figures and inscriptions etched in gold leaf**.**[258]

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[256] Wilpert, J., (1903) *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* Vol.1 plate, 213; Webb, M., (2001) *Churches and Catacombs of Rome,* 232-233.

[257] Rather than a martyr or Peter's daughter, Petronilla is generally assumed to have been a Roman lady called Aurea Petronilla. Webb, M., (2001), 232; Mâle, E., (1960) *The Early Churches of Rome*, 33-41; Kirsch, J.P., (1911) 'St. Petronilla' *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11781b.htm, accessed 18/1/2009. Recent research has also shown that some of the female names that have come down in history as martyred saints were actually powerful *patronae* of the Church, donating both money and land. Church leaders sometimes repackaged these women as martyrs because they believed this to be a far more acceptable role for Christian women. See Denzey, N., (2007) *The Bone Gatherers* for a discussion on this metamorphosis.

[258] Most examples of *vetri a fondo d'oro* were discovered in a fragmented form usually with only the circular base surviving. Because of this they are often described, rather erroneously, as medallions or roundels. In fact the decorated roundel would have probably formed the base of what was once a full sized drinking bowl or beaker. The decoration was created by engraving images and inscriptions onto a sheet of gold leaf that was then sandwiched between two pieces of circular glass forming a flat and weighty base for the bowl. The image and its accompanying inscription could then be viewed by looking inside the vessel. Although not expensive pieces, the glass bowls were popular amongst pagans and Christians alike and were decorated with a range of religious, mythological and secular subjects. The inscriptions that adorned them often include mottos encouraging their owners to 'live well' or 'drink well', suggesting that they may have been given as gifts on traditional occasions such as New Year or anniversaries. The largest collection of this type of gold glass is preserved in the *Museo della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*. Morey, C.R., (Ferrari, G., ed.) (1959) *The Gold-Glass*

The decorative schemes of the bowls included a variety of themes ranging from mythological to Biblical narrative scenes, Roman martyrs and even wedding scenes **(Fig. 76).** Unlike funerary frescoes and sarcophagi carvings these images are usually identified by the addition of inscriptions bearing a name.[259] Because of the obvious popularity of the bowls amongst the ordinary citizens of Rome and because they were commissioned by secular rather than clerical patrons, they provide an unbiased barometer as to the favoured holy figures amongst the Christian communities in the city.

The figures most commonly depicted on the bowls are the martyr saints.[260] While the most popular male martyrs were Peter and Paul, the female saint who seems to have been held in the highest esteem in Rome was a 13 year old virgin by the name of Agnes **(Fig 77).** The teenage saint had reputedly been executed during the reign of the emperor Diocletian in around 304 and her body buried in the catacombs.[261]

Collection of the Vatican Library. With additional catalogues of other gold-glass collections; Osborne, J., and Claridge, A., (1998) *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities*, Vol. Two, 199-255; See also Nicolai, V.F., Bisconti, F., and Mazzoleni, D., (2002), *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*, 80.

[259] More than 500 of these roundels have been discovered set into the mortar of the tombs. Nicolai et al (2002), 81, 90. Although remnants of the bowls have only been discovered in the catacombs it is not to say that they did not exist elsewhere, their very fragile nature has meant they have not survived above ground. There is also evidence that many of the glasses may have also been broken over time in order to extract the gold within them. Morey, C.R., (Ferrari G., ed.) (1959), 139; Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma Sotterranea* Vol. 2, 301; De Santis, P., (2000) 'Glass vessels as grave goods and grave ornament in the catacombs of Rome: some examples', in Pearce, J., Millett, M., and Struck, M., (eds.) *Burial, Society and Context in the Roman World*, 238-244.

[260] Of the 500 or so surviving vessels just over half have decipherable iconography. Out of these 140 examples are decorated with religious portraits of which nearly 75% feature portraits of martyred saints. Grig. L., (2004) 'Portraits, pontiffs and the Christianization of fourth-century Rome', *PBSR* Vol. 72, 203-30; Nicolai et al., (2002), 81.

[261] Agnes became one of the most celebrated female saints of the time with the Emperor Constantine's daughter Constantina choosing to build her own mausoleum above the shrine of the young virgin. Krautheimer, R., (2000) *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*, 25-30,

Although the Roman bishop Liberius (352-366) was Agnes' first papal promoter, it was his successor Damasus (366-384) who really elevated her importance. Indeed it was during his bishopric that the cult of the martyred saints really began to dominate.[262] This was mainly due to his carefully orchestrated plan to reinvent the history of Rome's Christian community and position the city as the premier centre of Christianity. He collected together and reburied a great many martyrs' remains in churches and martyria around the city as well as instigating an extensive structural renovation programme within the catacombs.[263] Agnes' background was very clearly Roman and it was important to Damasus that he claimed for Rome as many of her fellow martyrs as he could, even if they had no obvious link with the city.[264] Thecla, a follower of Paul, was an exception to this rule. One of the most celebrated female saints of the early Christian period, she was said to have escaped martyrdom on several occasions. She was also said to have been commissioned by Paul to preach and baptise, so even though she was reputedly buried in Rome,

[262] Peter Brown suggests that a 'cult' of the saints had far deeper roots that may have reached back into late Judaism. He suggests that the sudden surge of popularity in the late fourth century marked the moment when the bishops and ruling classes took control of the cult. Brown, P., (1981), 33.

[263] It has been suggested that Pope Damasus masculinised the cult of the saints by replacing the female martyrs with male ones. However, his development of the martyr's cult did go some way to restore the unity of the Church after his rather bloody rise to power. Denzey, (2007), 198-204; Grig, L., (2004a), 216; Nicolai, et al (2002), 49; Elsner (2006), 99. For a thorough analysis of the era of Damasus see Curran, J.R., (2000) *Pagan city and Christian capital: Rome in the fourth century*, 137-159 and McLynn, N., (1992), 'Christian Controversy and Violence in the Fourth Century', *Kodai* 3, 16-19; . Loomis, L.R., (trans.) (1916) *The Book of Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 79-83; Davis, R., (2000) *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715*, 30; Webb, M., (2001) *Churches and Catacombs of Rome*, 59, 246.

[264] His ultimate prize was Peter and Paul and he appears to have concentrated most of his efforts on discovering proof that the two apostles had been martyred and buried in the city. In fact it is only in the Greek apocryphal 'Acts of Peter' written around 200 in Asia Minor that we find any mention of Peter and Paul meeting each other in Rome. Undaunted by this Damasus carefully crafted a new and primarily fictitious relationship between the two men and used art to promulgate this message by portraying Peter and Paul face to face or standing together as equals. This tableau became known as *Concordia Apostolorum* with the two saints symbolising both the Jewish and gentile roots of Christianity as well as the twin pillars of the Roman Church, a skilful brand image that tapped into traditional twin symbolism by harking back to Romulus and Remus as twin founders of Rome. The Peter and Paul iconography formed one of the key components of a literary and visual propaganda campaign created to promote the primacy of Rome throughout the Christian empire. See Huskinson, J., (1982) *Concordia Apostolorum: Christian Propaganda at Rome in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: a study of Early Christian Iconography and Iconology*; Grig, L., (2004a), 216; White, C., (2007) *The Emergence of Christianity*, 66. See also Salvadori, S.M., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, 457-460 n.268.

Damasus was reluctant to promote her as a role model. He saw her independence as too much of a threat to the male hierarchy of the Church.[265]

Damasus was more comfortable with women taking on the role of bankers rather than church leaders and would actively court the wealthy wives and widows of the elite Roman families.[266] Providing Christian role models with whom these high born women could identify was part of Damasus' sales technique and Agnes' own aristocratic background was strongly promoted. Stories of her martyrdom were carefully woven into poems and literary works created to be read aloud in the Roman tradition of rhetoric. Much was made of the fact that Agnes would rather die than sacrifice her virtue.[267]

While this highly moral ideal was much applauded by traditional pagan aristocrats, on another level the sexual overtones of her martyrdom appear to have tapped into the Roman audiences need for public spectacle combining a heady mix of sex and pain. Indeed the Christian poet Prudentius described in lurid detail how Agnes identified her executioner as a lover and rejoiced at the erectness of the sword that

[265] Thecla's story first appears in the late second-century 'Acts of Paul and Thecla'. Elliott, J.K., (2005) 'The Acts of Paul and Thecla' in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 364-389. For a detailed analysis of the development of the cult of Thecla see Davies, S.J., (2001) *The Cult of St Thecla: A tradition of women's piety in Late Antiquity*. For a recent analysis of the literary and rhetorical aspects of these works see Johnson, S.F., (2006) *The Life and Miracles of Thekla*: *A Literary Study* and Hayne, L., (1994) 'Thecla and the Church Fathers' in *VigC* 48, 209-218. Davies suggests that the story of Thecla originated as an oral tradition and may have been developed within a female community keen to encourage women to embrace new roles of leadership in the early Christian mission. Davis, S., (2001), 13**.** The fourth century pilgrim Egeria writes about her visit to Thecla's shrine in Wilkinson, J., (1973) *Egeria's Travels*, 288-289.

[266] Damasus' numerous attempts to gain the financial patronage of wealthy aristocratic converts earned him the nickname *matronarum auriscalpius* translated as 'ladies' ear-tickler'. McLynn, N., (1992), 15-44; Grig, L., (2004), 127.

[267] Agnes seems to have provided the archetype of the virgin martyr, especially in a Roman aristocratic context. Grig (2004), 84.

was used to kill her.[268] However, the description of Agnes' pleasure at the sight of the executioner's naked sword was intended to be understood not just as sexual innuendo, this was the story of a woman ultimately controlled by men. Despite her bold and fearless behaviour Agnes dies a submissive death, carefully rearranging her dress in order to preserve her modesty.[269]

There is no doubt that in late fourth century Rome, Agnes dominated the decorative schemes of the *vetri a fondo d'oro*.[270] However she was not the only woman to be depicted on glass. Another three examples portray female orantes identified by the tantalizing inscription Maria, while a fourth bowl fragment is decorated with an orante named as Mara. The inscription of Maria would seem to be an irrefutable piece of evidence that these tiny golden figures are indeed images of the Virgin Mary without the Christ child. However, there are several issues surrounding these glass fragments that need to be reconsidered before a secure identification can be made.

Two of the bowl bases are decorated in a similar fashion, featuring three frontal figures each identified by an inscription in Latin. The woman has the name Maria engraved over her head and she is flanked by two male figures identified by the names Petrus and Paulus. One of the bowls shows the Maria figure wearing an

[268] Poetry and rhetoric formed an important aspect of the cult of saints. The Spanish poet Prudentius (348-413), in his collection of martyr poems called the *Peristephanon,* glorifies the cult of the martyrs and tells the stories of their tortures and deaths in all their gory details. He describes the various martyr ceremonies he encountered in Rome and the special sanctity accorded to saints shrines. Prudentius believed that rhetoric formed an important role within Christianity so that his stories of the sufferings of the martyrs read aloud would add weight to the intercessory powers of the saints. Palmer, A.M., (1989) *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 43.

[269] Grig (2004), 84; Ross, J., (2008*) Figuring the Feminine*, 79-82, 83-4; Burrus, V., (1995) 'Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius' *JECS* 3, 25-46.

[270] Agnes is depicted on 15 different bowl fragments and is second only to Peter and Paul in popularity. Grig (2004a), 219.

ankle length wide sleeved tunica and a heavy palla girded high under the breast and pulled up over her head **(Fig. 78)**. On the other bowl Maria is bareheaded and wears a jewelled necklace over her tunica **(Fig. 79).** The third Maria bowl fragment features two female orantes facing each other, one identified as Maria, the other Agnes **(Fig. 80).** The gold glass fragment that bears the inscription Mara features a single haloed orante standing between two olive trees **(Fig. 81).**[271]

What is puzzling is that in **(Fig. 80)** Maria and Agnes appear as mirror images of each other. If the Maria orante had indeed been intended to be a portrait of Mary then it would have been highly inappropriate to have given Agnes equal prominence.[272] It is also striking that Maria, unlike the mysterious figure of Mara in (**Fig.81),** does not appear to be haloed.

It is of course not inconceivable that the women featured on the bowls just happened to be called Maria and are in no way connected to the Virgin Mary. Rossi found various references to a martyr called Maria said to have died in 256.[273] Indeed, it has been suggested that different communities in the city had their own

[271] Although it has been suggested that Mara was a spelling mistake it is also true that name Mara was a relatively common Hebrew name in Rome at this time. Morey does not identify this figure as the Virgin Mary calling her instead a 'female orant, nimbed'. Morey, C.R., (Ferrari, G., ed.) (1959), 9, fig 33. He also refers to a glass roundel featuring a married couple with their children carrying the inscription *AMADA E ABAS . MARA . GERMANUS . VIVAS*. Morey, C. R., (1953) *Early Christian Art: An Outline of Style and Iconography in Sculpture and Painting from Antiquity to the Eighth Century*, 15.

[272] Morey describes the roundel design from the Civic Museum Bologna as that of 'two female busts with faces in profile facing each other, wearing a tunic and mantle with broad collar and veil'. In the field between the heads is a disc enclosing a *Chi Rho* monogram above a rotolus. The inscription is *AGNES MARIA*. Morey. (1959), 47 fig 265, XXVII.

[273] Rossi de, G.B. (1864-7) *La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana descritta ed illustrata*, Vol. 3, 200.

particular favourite saint, so minor martyrs such as Maria and Mara may have been commemorated in this way.[274]

On the other hand it could also be argued that the reason Roman Christians adopted the name Maria was because they were already venerating Mary as Jesus' mother. However, the etymology of Maria is far from straight forward. In his analysis of the early Christian communities in Rome, Peter Lampe proposed that rather than a Latinisation of the Hebrew name Miriam, the name Mary/Maria may have been a *gentilicium* or family name indicating descent from a patrician family. It was, he explains, common practice for women to be given the feminine version of the paternal gentile name, as for example, Julia a lady of the Julian house. Maria was in fact the feminine form of the Latin name Marius and would therefore have been used by all the female members of the house of Marius. This derivation presents a distinctly Roman and even pagan origin for the name Maria.[275]

Lucy Grig proposes an alternative reading of some of the *vetri a fondo d'oro* figures that could also be applied to the puzzling Marias. She cites the example of a similar glass fragment featuring an orante woman identified as Peregrina standing between Peter and Paul. Having failed to identify Peregrina as either a saint or martyr, Grig decides instead that the figure may have been the portrait of a devotee commending her soul to the care of the two saints **(Fig. 82)**.[276] If this deduction is correct then a similar identification could also be attached to the three unhaloed Maria figures.

[274] It has been suggested that the vessels could have been produced for the celebration of martyr feast days and linked with cult sites around the city. Grig (2004a), 203-30.
[275] Lampe cites over 108 references to the name of Maria in Rome in the first two centuries. Lampe, P., (2003) *From Paul to Valentinus, Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, 168-176.
[276] The name Peregrina is not known from any hagiographical source. Grig (2004), 224.

Whether the Maria featured on the gilded glass in (**Figs 78-80)** was a saint, devotee or the mother of Christ, in sheer numbers alone she could not compete with Agnes, who in the fourth century had become the perfect role model for the Christian women of Rome. She was brave, steadfast, subservient to men and celibate while still retaining a certain sexual allure. Having the right role models for their women formed an integral part of the Roman male psyche. Feminine virtue was regarded as a sign of the moral health of the Roman community and since the early centuries of the Roman Republic it was the celibate Vestal Virgins who were the embodiment of both the city and citizenry of Rome.[277]

This attachment to celibacy was continued by the Christian church and by the fourth century it had become an immensely powerful weapon in their developing arsenal. As with the Vestal Virgins, the power of the female saints lay not just in their celibacy but also their virginity and up until Mary stepped into the spotlight they would continue to be promoted by Church leaders as role models for both men and women.[278] However, celibacy was not confined to young unmarried virgins. Because of the difficulty in finding suitable Christian partners, widows were also discouraged from re-marrying which led to an increase in the number of celibate older women. Many of the poorer widows remained dependent on the Church for

[277] A Vestal Virgin's loss of maidenhood was regarded as a dire threat to the safety of the state and if the state was under threat then it was Vestals who were held accountable. Even though the Vestals were not legally tied to a man, they were still under the control of the *Pontifex Maximus*, who could punish or even execute them if he felt they had compromised their role. The role of *Pontifex Maximus* became absorbed by the Pope and still forms part of the papal title. Parker, H. N., (2004) 'Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State' *AJP* Vol. 125, 563-601; Cooper, K., (1996) *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, 19; Clark, G., (1994) *Women in Late Antiquity*, vii.

[278] For the first Christians the idea of sexual abstinence was influenced by the belief that the return of Christ was imminent and so marriage and childbirth was no longer a priority. Church leaders in the second and third centuries may have continued to promote celibacy because of a chronic shortage of suitable Christian partners. Marriage with pagans was discouraged and upper class women were unlikely to marry below their station. Pomeroy, S.B., (1994) *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity;* Brown, P., (1988) *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 147.

their support; however, an increasing number of high-class women were relishing their independence and also choosing not to remarry. This was a situation that started to backfire on the Church when, rather than modelling themselves on the subservient Agnes, they chose instead the spirited Thecla for their inspiration as they made a stand against the traditional patriarchate structure of Roman society.[279]

Instead of restricting themselves to a simple life of celibacy many of these wealthy women chose to embrace poverty as well by giving away their substantial fortunes to the Church. As we have already seen, church leaders such as Damasus initially courted these women, not just for their generous donations but also because they felt they might help to convert other pagan aristocratic Roman families. What the churchmen had not expected was how appealing the concept of celibacy was for many upper class women who had previously felt trapped by centuries of Roman patriarchy.[280] Church leaders now found themselves confronted by two unexpected challenges. The first was having to pacify antagonized aristocratic families who saw centuries of Roman tradition rapidly evaporating. The second was the need to

[279] Tertullian had complained that some Christians were using the example of Thecla to legitimise women's roles of teaching and baptising in the church. Souter, A., (trans.) (1919) *Tertullian*'s *Treatises Concerning Prayer and Baptism*, Chapter 17; Castelli, E., (2004*) Martyrdom & Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, Chapter 5; Davis, S., (2001); Matthews, S., (2001) 'Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography' in *JFSR*, Vol. 17.2, 39-55; Bremmer, J., (ed.) (1996) *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Studies of the Acts of the Apostles 2; Hayne, L**.,** (1994) Theclar and the Church Fathers, *VigC*, Vol. 48, 3, 209-218. See also MacDonald, D.R. (1983) *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*.

[280] Clark, E.A., (1994) 'Ideology, History, and the Construction of Woman in Late Ancient Christianity,' *JECS* 2, 155-184. This was a dilemma that was especially relevant to the Roman Church. The situation was different in the eastern regions of the empire where celibate asceticism had its earliest manifestation. Here young women and men who decided to remain celibate were able to remain as an integral part of their families. Fathers benefited from the piety of virgin daughters, becoming elevated to an almost priestly role they were also spared the financial burden of a wedding dowry. The prayers of virgins were also regarded as an extremely powerful prophylactic for the whole community. Having a virgin to pray for the welfare of the household became so important that a childless family would often adopt a servant to fulfil the role. This situation started to change with the development of celibate communities where both men and women could enjoy a new system of social ranking away from the traditional categories of wealth, family and marriage**.** Elm, S., (1994) *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, 29 – 37; Cooper, K., (1996), 232.

control the sudden influx into the Church of strong minded women used to giving orders who were demanding prominent roles within the church hierarchy.[281] What was even more disturbing for the church leaders was that when these roles were not forthcoming, some frustrated women often chose to follow other alternative or heretical groups.

In the early centuries of Christianity, pagan writers such as Celsus used the uncontrolled behaviour of women as a way of ridiculing what they saw as a Jewish cult. They even went as far as to suggest that Jesus was the result of an adulterous affair.[282] Fourth century church leaders resorted to a similar strategy, describing rival heretical groups as being made up of wild and unrestrained women. It was a powerful and very effective literary image. The church of Rome was described as a chaste and obedient woman as opposed to the heretical church portrayed as sexually promiscuous and chaotic.[283] This literary image was destined to become translated into a visual image via the Greco-Roman artistic technique of Personification, which as we saw in the previous chapter, was an artistic tradition that used the human form to encapsulate an inanimate object or idea.

The way in which Personification influenced the development of Mary's iconography forms the basis for the next part of this thesis. However, before I start

[281] See Denzey, (2007) for a revealing analysis of the role of women in the early church; Clark, E., (1983) *Women in the Early Church*, 19-20; Brown, P., (1988), 140-59, 259-84 and 341-86.
[282] Origen *Contra Celsus* Book 1 Chapter 28, 32 in Stevenson, J., A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD337, 132-133.
[283] Burrus, V., (1991) 'The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome,' *HTR* 84, 230-231. Burrus suggests that the association between woman and heresy was more allegorical than literal and the Church used women as symbols of the right and wrong type of Christian community. See Denzey for an analysis of what she calls the 'Church's ideological campaign to impugn women's character'. Denzey, (2007), 182-186; Brown, (1988), 248.

that journey I want first to tackle the more fashionable theory that Mary's artistic origins were rooted in pagan goddess imagery.

Chapter 7

Mary and the Goddess Myth

A thorough analysis of the various theories as to the pagan roots of Mariology is beyond the scope of this thesis. However I have no doubt that the ancient goddess cults had a part to play in the development of the cult of Mary, especially in Egypt and the east. Yet I am not convinced that the 'direct line' in Rome and the west that Stephen Benko proposed in his study on the roots of Mariology is quite as clearly discernible as he would have us believe.[284]

The idea that Marian veneration had its roots in pagan goddess cults has a long and complicated history. As with so many other aspects of religious history, it is awash with opinions and agendas. In the sixteenth century the Roman Church became especially sensitive to the idea that clerics within their own ranks might have been suggesting a link between paganism and Christianity. Indeed the Dominican friar and astronomer Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) had the temerity to claim that Christianity had been influenced by the cults of Isis and Osiris. This was a serious indiscretion that resulted in him being burnt at the stake as a heretic.[285]

The influence of Isis on the cult of Mary resurfaced as a theory during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the writings of a new breed of amateur

[284] Benko, S., (2004) *The Virgin Goddess:Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*
[285] Witt, R.E., (1997), *Isis in the Ancient World*, 269.

scholars.[286] William Ricketts Cooper (1843-1878) was a perfect example of this new enthusiast. He started his career as a fabric designer but then went on to become a missionary, an amateur Egyptologist and finally founder of the Society of Biblical Archaeology. In his book *The Horus Myth in its Relation to Christianity* he stated plainly that:

> *The works of art, the ideas, the expressions, and the heresies of the first four centuries of the Christian era cannot be well studied without a right comprehension of the nature and influence of the Horus myth.*[287]

The Victorian Egyptologist Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge followed in Cooper's footsteps. Besides translating legends on the life of Mary from ancient Ethiopian texts he had no hesitation in linking Isis and the Virgin Mary both in terms of veneration and pictorial and sculptural art.[288] In fact such a link had already been made some years earlier in the more mainstream *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts* written by the proto-feminist author Anna Jameson. In her study of the 'origins and history of the effigies of the Madonna', Jameson suggested a link not only with Isis but also a variety of other goddess images.[289]

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[286] It is interesting to note that in the seventeenth century, Cesare Baronio author of the *Annales Ecclesiastici* (See Chapter One), made a point of correcting the assumptions of a 'certain antiquarian'. Baronio said the antiquarian had claimed that the reverse of a coin of Julian the Apostate represented the Virgin and Child because at that time the pagan emperor was pretending to be Christian. Baronio compared the image with one on a coin of Hadrian and deduced that it was in fact Isis with a child at her breast. This was a mistake that led him to exclaim 'God forbid that we should rely on fictions in our endeavours to illustrate the Christian religion!' Haskell, F., (1993) *History and Its Images*, 106.

[287] Cooper W.R., (2008 reprint from 1877) *The Horus Myth in its Relation to Christianity*, 49.

[288] Wallis Budge, E.A., (1904) *The Gods of the Egyptians, or, Studies in Egyptian Mythology*: *The miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Vol. 2.

[289] Jameson, A., (1890) *Legends of the Madonna As Represented in the Fine Arts*, xx.

These ideas received yet another boost when the anthropologist Sir James Frazer incorporated many of Budge's ideas into *The Golden Bough,* devoting an entire chapter to Isis and her artistic links with the Virgin Mary.[290] Throughout the twentieth century when feminist spirituality was at its height, a plethora of new books and papers were published on the history of goddess veneration, many of which proposed a link between goddess worship and the cult of Mary.[291] Amongst them was the much lauded *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* written by the psychologists Ann Baring and Julie Cashford. They announced without hesitation that:

> *Portraits from the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth show Mary seated in the same position as Isis with Horus, wearing the mural crown of Cybele and Diana, and with the gorgon of Athena painted on her breast.*[292]

This was a bold statement but unfortunately completely unsubstantiated by the authors either by pictorial evidence or references. When Jameson proposed such a connection she did at least illustrate her theory with a woodcut of an ancient bas

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[290] Frazer, J.G., (1963) *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Chapter XLI. Frazer's ideas became hugely influential amongst a whole generation of writers such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune, Robert Graves, Ezra Pound, Mary Renault, Joseph Campbell, Naomi Mitchison and Camille Paglia as well as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

[291] Lasareff, V., (1938) 'Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin', *AB*, 20; Morey, C., (1942) *Early Christian Art*; Wellen, G.A., (1961) *Theotokos*: *Eine Ikonographische Abhandlung uber das Gottesmutterbild in fruhchristlicher*; Tran Tam Tinh, V., (1973) *Isis Lactans: Corpus Des Monuments Grico-Romains D'Isis Allaitant Harpocrate* , 40-47 ; Ruether, R.R., (1977) *Mary, The Feminine Face of the Church*, 50; Ashe, G., (1977) *The Virgin*; Larson, M.A., (1977) *The Story of Christian Origins*; Galon, E.W., (1989) *The Once and Future Goddess-A Study for Our Time*, Warner, M., (1990) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*; Wilkinson, R.H., (1992) *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*; Pelikan, J., (1996); *Mary Through the Centuries*; Begg, E., (1996) *The Cult of the Black Virgin;* Corrington, G.P., (1992) *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity,172-74; 188-89; 194-9.* Benko, S., (2004).

[292] Baring, A., and Cashford, J., (1993) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, 550.

relief of an enthroned Isis suckling Horus, even though the image she chose originated around six centuries before the birth of Christ **(Fig. 83).**[293] In fact, it was a rather different looking Isis, who from the final century of the Ptolemaic dynasty went on to become one of the most widely venerated goddesses of Greco-Roman Egypt **(Fig. 84).**[294] Rather than a rigidly stylised sculpture, the Hellenised Isis figures portrayed the goddess and her son in a far more humanised manner **(Fig 85).** Yet during the second and third centuries BC when the cult of Isis found its way from Egypt across the Mediterranean to Italy, this was not the way the goddess was portrayed.[295]

The Roman Isis was depicted in both statues and on imperial coins as tall and regal, dressed in a long elegant gown with a fringed mantle tied in the characteristic 'Isis knot'. In one hand she carried a sistrum and in the other a vessel for containing the sacred water of the Nile **(Figs. 86 & 87)**. When she was depicted with her son it was not in the traditional role of the nursing mother so favoured in her native Egypt. Instead she stood with the young Horus at her side **(Fig. 88).** This reluctance to portray Isis in a more maternal role does not appear to have been influenced by any Roman coyness about such an intimate scene. The imagery of a nursing mother was popular within pagan Roman art. *Fortuna Primigenia*, one of the aspects of Fortuna

[293] The ancient image of a high back throne was also the hieroglyph of the name Isis as well as forming part of her head-dress. Rather than a maternal image, these figurines were said to symbolise the goddess imparting the milk of salvation to the pharaoh. Corrington, G.P., (1992), 89-98.
[294] The Ptolemaic Dynasty reigned in Egypt for nearly 300 years, from 305 BC to 30 BC. Horus was renamed Harpocrates by the Greeks. This was the Hellenised form of the Egyptian Harpa-Khruti meaning Horus the child. The inspiration for the Hellenised Isis is said to have come from the Greek nursing deity known as the *kourotrophos*. Corrington, G.P., (1989) 'The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity', *HTR* Vol. 82, No. 4, 393-420. For a full analysis of the development of the Isis Lactans cult see also Tran Tam Tinh, (1973). See also Mathews, T.F. and Muller, N., (2005) 'Isis and Mary in early Icons' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) *Images of the Mother of God*: *Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, 3-13.
[295] The cult was initially brought from Egypt via the sea trade and sailors were especially keen on her protective role creating goddess sub-sects such as Isis *Epikoos* (of ready help) Isis *Pelagia* (of the sea) or Isis *Euploia* (of fortunate sailing) or Isis *Pharia* linking her with the famous Pharos lighthouse outside Alexandria. Goudchaux, G.W., 'Cleopatra's subtle religious strategy' in Walker, S., and Higgs, P., (eds.) (2001) *Cleopatra of Egypt: from History to Myth*, 131.

the goddess of fate, was often depicted suckling children as was the goddess of the rising sun *Mater Matuta,* although she was usually depicted holding several swaddled babies simultaneously.[296] It was also a pose used for depictions of allegorical figures such as *Tellus Mater* and Charity and for a while it became especially popular in imperial propaganda art (**Fig. 89).** Empresses who had produced imperial progeny would be depicted on coins suckling their offspring, a rather intimate scene designed to promote the message to the populace that all women should bear children **(Fig. 90**). Indeed this propagandist image continued even into the Christian era as evidenced by coins featuring the emperor Constantine's wife Fausta who was portrayed nursing their two sons.[297]

Although it was acceptable for Christian imperial women to absorb pagan allegorical imagery and be portrayed as breast feeding women, it was not an image that would be easily absorbed into later Marian art.[298] In the west we have no examples from before the medieval period of Mary nursing the baby Jesus. Even in Egypt, where the cult of Mary evolved in the shadow of the Isis temples, there are surprisingly few images of the nursing Mary. Those that do appear from the late

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[296] *Fortuna Primigenia*'s worship was centred in the city of Praeneste, (modern day Palestrina in Italy). The interpretation of the term *Primigenia* is varied. Some scholars describe her as the 'first-born' daughter of Jupiter. Others however suggest that it means she was the first to bear children and the two infant children she is depicted suckling were intended to represent Juno and Jupiter. *Mater Matuta* had a temple in Rome and her festival *Matralia* was celebrated on the 11th June to which only free women in their first marriage were allowed to take part. The women's prayers could only be for the welfare of their sisters' children rather than their own, suggesting that this goddess was responsible for the care of children entrusted to women who were not their natural mothers. *Mater Matuta* was also identified with Ilythuia or Lucina the goddess of childbirth as the dawn was closely linked with new born children. Witt, R.E., (1997), 86; Guirand, F., & Pierre, A.V., (1996) 'Roman Mythology' in *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, (trans. Aldington, R., & Ames, D.,), 225; King, K.L., (1997) *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, 355; Littlewood, R.J., (2006) *A Commentary on Ovid's Fasti, Book 6: Bk. 6*, 147-148.

[297] Pomeroy, S.B., (1994) *Goddesses, Whores, Wives & Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, 184-185. This imagery was probably linked with dynastic succession rather than maternal love, Kalavrezou, I., (1990) 'Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary became "Meter Theou", *DOP*, Vol. 44, 165-172.

[298] McGuckin, J., (2001) 'The Paradox of the Virgin-Theotokos:Evangelism and Imperial Politics in the 5th Century Byzantine World', *Maria, A Journal of Marian Theology*, 5-23;

sixth or early seventh centuries are only to be found in private chapels and monks' cells.[299] In these images there is certainly a strong similarity between the symbolism of Isis imparting the milk of salvation to the pharaoh and the Eucharistic *Galaktotrophousa*. This link may well have disturbed Church leaders outside of Egypt which is perhaps why the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa* did not become popular until the medieval period, a time when the link with Isis had faded into ancient history. The unusual hand gesture of the Byzantine *Hodegetria* icon may even have been an adaption of this early imagery (**Fig 91**). Rather than pointing to the child Jesus as the title *Hodegetria* or 'pointer of the way' suggested, Mary could originally have been cupping her naked breast. I suggest this detail was painted out by later Byzantine artists who were unhappy at the idea of exposing Mary's naked breast **(Fig 92).** [300]

So, looking at the previous evidence, it would seem that linking the development of the iconography of Mary in the west with that of Isis is far from straightforward. Of course, Isis is not the only goddess who has been linked with Mary. Demeter, Juno, Astarte, Aphrodite, Diana/Artemis, Ceres and Cybele have all been cited as highly influential precursors to the Mother of God. In the late twentieth century

[299] Tran Tam Tinh, V., (1973), 46. Elizabeth Bolman has suggested that the prevalence of these frescoes in celibate monks' cells may indicate a non-maternal explanation for this imagery. Citing Clement of Alexandria's writings of the second century she suggests that Mary's virginity meant that the milk in her breasts could only have been created by God and therefore symbolised the Logos. In this way the *Galaktotrophousa* rather than symbolising a nursing mother was actually intended to represent "a metaphor for the Eucharist" a far more appropriate metaphor for an unmarried monk. Bolman, E.S., 'The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa and the cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) *Images of the Mother of God* , 19.

[300] Parlby, G., (2002) *St Luke as an artist: the evolution of a legend and its relevance to the development of the iconography of the Virgin and Child*, 25; T.F. Mathews and N. Muller (2005), 9. The original *Hodegetria* icon, said to have been painted from life by St Luke, was the most celebrated icon of Constantinople. It was said to have been brought back from the Holy Land by Eudocia, the wife of Theodosius II (408-50) although this dating has been disputed. It was destroyed by the invading Ottoman army in 1453. Angelidi, C., and Papamastorakis, T., 'The Veneration of the Virgin Hodegetria and the Hodegon Monastery' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) (2000) *Mother of God, Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, 373-387.

Stephen Benko developed this theory to great effect in *The Virgin Goddess*, his ground breaking analysis of the influence of pagan goddess cults in the development of Mariology. He suggested that there were many goddess 'forerunners of the veneration of Mary' as he believed Mariology was 'too complex a phenomenon to be derived from a single source'.[301]

One of the key Marian forerunners presented by Benko was the eastern 'mother of the gods', Cybele. Originating in Asia Minor, the cult of Cybele had been introduced to Rome in 204 BC as a protective deity during the invasion of Hannibal.[302] Her arrival was documented by local commentators who described the goddess as a black meteorite stone. However, Cybele soon adopted a more human form and was usually depicted seated on a lion throne or riding in a chariot pulled by lions. Like many of her predecessors, Cybele was a chaste virgin goddess whose son/lover Attis was sacrificed and reborn in the spring as a symbol of renewal. Despite her title of *Magna Mater*, Cybele was never depicted in a maternal role although her identity was sometimes linked with the mothers of emperors in their role as 'Mother of God'. This can be seen in examples of coins of Julia Domna depicted with a seated Cybele and an inscription that designates the empress as 'Mother of Gods' **(Fig. 93)**.

The goddess Artemis, identified with the Roman goddess Diana, was known as 'the virgin all mother' and her cult was at the height of its popularity in Ephesus in Asia Minor in the third century. Her iconography was very specific and although at this cult centre she was portrayed as a many breasted fertility symbol, like Cybele she

[301] Benko, S., (2004), 52.
[302] Ibid, 70.

was never portrayed in a maternal role **(Fig. 94).** In Rome the goddess Juno as the mother of the gods was a very important deity. Every year on the 1st March women held a festival in her honour called the *matronalia* as a tribute to her role as Juno Lucina, the goddess of childbirth. The date of the festival was associated with the dedication of a temple to Juno Lucina on the Esquiline Hill in around 268BC. However, as with Artemis and Cybele, Juno is never depicted with a child.

Demeter was the goddess of grain and fertility and was known as Ceres within the Roman pantheon of gods. Ceres was often portrayed alongside her daughter Proserpina who was depicted as a slightly smaller replica of her mother**.** By the imperial period she was invoked in funerary rites and her image does appear alongside Christian tombs in the Roman catacombs.[303] However, as we can see from the coins of the time, the imagery of Demeter with her daughter is markedly different in design to that of Mary and Jesus (**Fig. 95)**.

Alongside the goddess imagery there is also the extremely confusing area of ex-votive offerings. These often take the shape of seated and sometimes nursing women, presented at temples and sanctuaries as offerings to specific gods or goddesses in order to ensure safe childbirth or to give thanks after a successful birth.[304] In the past these statuettes have been interpreted as representations of an enthroned deity. Museums and art galleries around the world still boast many examples of 'goddess images' of all ages, shapes and sizes, but perhaps the commonest images appear in simple terracotta. Most often these figures show

[303] Denzey suggests that an arcosolium in the catacomb of Via Latina may have been constructed by a devotee or priestess of Ceres for her Christian daughter. Denzey, N., (2007) *The Bone Gatherers*, Chapter 2.

[304] Other votive offerings made from terracotta in the shape of female anatomical organs have been found during archaeological excavations at various temples in Rome and across central Italy. Littlewood, R.J., (2006) 147-148.

nothing more than a woman seated in a high back chair, sometimes holding a child in her arms or to her breast. There is no inscription and in the absence of an attribute, no way of telling what the figure represents: yet up until recently they were often labeled 'enthroned or seated goddess' **(Figs. 96 & 97)**.[305]

These so called 'enthroned goddesses' continue to be used as evidence of a link between goddess and Marian iconography despite the context and the time frame in which they were originally created. Baring and Cashford link the image of an Etruscan cinerary urn from the fifth century BC with a carving of Mary on a lion throne created 1,800 years later in the fourteenth century (**Fig. 98)**.[306] Six hundred years after the cinerary urn was created, we see a far less grand, but equally poignant example from a child's grave found near Arles in Southern France. Buried next to the bones of a child, archaeologists discovered a small terracotta image of a nursing mother which they identified as a protective charm for the dead child **(Fig. 99).**

I contend that this confusing overlap between votive offerings and goddess statues has obscured the real origins of Mary's cult and iconography. Because of the sheer volume of mother and child images I believe that many scholars have been lured into following an entirely erroneous path in interpreting the early cult of Mary as a natural progression from the worship of the Mother Goddess. Identifying early Marian images solely in a maternal setting leads us to the view that it is Mary's role

[305] Higgins, R.A., (1967) *Greek Terracottas*, 61-63, 71-74.
[306] They describe the sculpture as an Etruscan 'mother goddess'. At the recent *From the Temple and the Tomb: Etruscan Treasures from Tuscany* exhibition at the The Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University Exhibition in Dallas, the urn was described as *Mater Matuta*, a figurative symbol of Motherhood**.** http://www.smu.edu/News/2009/etruscian-exhibit-jan2009.aspx accessed 21/2/2009**.**

as a mother that is her most important manifestation.[307] Indeed this maternal link forms the basis of Stephen Benko's theory that the 'reverence for motherhood and childbirth is the basic principle of Mariology, a principle which Christianity inherited from its pagan forerunners'.[308] In my opinion we should be looking for an entirely different archetype in our search for the roots of Marian iconography in the west. Rather than a goddess figure we should be focussing on the pagan art form we met in Chapters Five and Six – the art of Personification.

Personifications of cities, states, rivers, seasons and other abstract ideas formed an important part of the artistic tradition in late antiquity. The majority of personifications were female, depicted either standing in a statuesque form or seated on different styles of chairs holding the attributes specific to them. In the context of imperial iconography the abstract ideas they personified were intended to emphasise the positive aspects of a specific emperor's reign, thereby ensuring devotion from the populace. A good example of this technique was the figure of *Annona*, the personification of the annual grain supply. Her image often appeared on coins produced between the mid first and late third century.[309] She was depicted standing or sometimes seated holding the prow of a ship with her lap full of grain (**Fig. 100**). Grain was a valuable commodity in Rome and was extremely important to the health and stability of the city.

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[307] Michael Carroll makes the point that it is a mistake to link Mary with previous mother goddesses because she is 'completely dissociated from sexuality'. Carroll, M.P. (1986) *The Cult of the Virgin*: *Psychological Origins*, 5.

[308] Benko, (2004), 5.

[309] *See Toynbee, J.M.C., (1954) 'Picture-Language in Roman Art and Coinage' in* Essays in Roman Coinage*; Oster, R., (1982) 'Numismatic Window into the Social World of Early Christianity: A Methodological Inquiry',* JBL, *Vol. 101, No.2 , 195-223;* Crawford, M.H., (1983) 'Roman Imperial Coins Types and the Formation of Public Opinion' in Brooke, C.N.L; Stewart, B.H.I; Pollard, J.G; Volk, T.R., *(eds.) Studies in Numismatic Method Presented to Philip Grierson, ed. C.N.L.Brooke, 47-64;*

Another female figure with important political connotations was *Felicitas*, the personification of prosperity. She too was a favoured figure on coins where she was used to show that the reign of a particular emperor had provided his subjects with a happy and contented life. She was normally depicted seated, holding a caduceus, cornucopia or a basket of fruit along with a palm branch or a patera (**Fig. 101**). The personification of *Concordia* was another popular figure in imperial iconography. She was used when the emperor wanted to emphasise that he was in harmony with his army, his co-ruler or even his wife **(Fig. 102).** *Concordia* would also be depicted seated often holding a patera and cornucopia and sometimes with a small childlike figure before her intending to represent *Spes*, the personification of hope.[310] *Pietas* represented religious piety for the emperor while for the empress she was the personification of familial duties. She would be portrayed on coins with the figure of *Pietas* holding children, thereby signifying that the empress had fulfilled her duty to her husband and Rome.

Alongside these propaganda personifications, images of geographical areas such as rivers and cities were also portrayed in human form. The most famous of these was of course Roma, the personification of both the city and the empire. She was usually portrayed in a seated position and, as shown on the triumphal arch of Severus, would also be seen receiving tributes from vanquished enemies, a tableau very similar in design to the Adoration **(Fig. 103)**.[311] Roma is an example of a personification that became powerful enough to be deified. Up until the second century the protector of a city had always been a fully fledged goddess such as Athena, Artemis or Hera. In an audacious bid to rival the power of the gods, the

[310] Concordia was also represented as a married couple and this iconography came to personify civic order. Denzey (2007), 66.
[311] Beard, M., North, J., and Price S., (1998) *Religions of Rome. Vol. 1: A History*, 158-160, 257-259 Stafford E., and Herrin, J., (eds.) *Personification in the Greek World from Antiquity to Byzantium.*

emperor Hadrian (117-130) decided to promote the personification of Roma to the level of goddess with her own cult. This tradition was continued by successive emperors, so that by the time of Constantine in the early third century, the Roma imagery was a familiar and much revered representation of the enduring power of the city and her protective divinities **(Fig. 104**).[312]

Over time personifications would become an integral part of Roman art even though their design and meaning had become increasingly abstract. They featured prominently in domestic mosaic art, becoming particularly popular in the eastern part of the empire. Personification mosaics developed alongside a growing fashion for philosophical debate and neo-Platonism amongst pagans and Christians alike. Indeed it became fashionable to install mosaics of personifications in the dining rooms of exclusive villas in order to stimulate a more philosophical discussion amongst dinner guests **(Fig. 105)**.[313]

Personifications also formed an integral part of the literature of the time, so it is perhaps unsurprising that in a second century Christian apocryphal text we find a pagan style personification playing a prominent role. The text is *The Shepherd of Hermas,* a work once considered important enough to be included in the *Codex Sinaiticus* manuscript.[314] The story is made up of a series of visions, or revelations

[312] Another personification that began to merge with Roma was Fortune otherwise known as Tyche. Fortune/Tyche represented the city's institutions, laws and politics, in effect the very essence of the state and its peoples. However to the Romans, Fortune/Tyche became such an important personification that she also grew into a deity in her own right, Beard, North, & Price, (1998), 158-160, 257-259; Limberis, V., (1994) *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople*, 125.

[313] Ling, R., (1998) *Ancient Mosaics*, 55. Dunbabin , K.M.D., (1999) *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, 168. See also Leader-Newby R., 'Personifications and paideia in Late Antique mosaics from the Greek East' in Stafford, E., and Herrin, J., (eds.) (2005) *Personification in the Greek World*, 231-246.

[314] It was popular amongst all sections of the early Christian community and continued to be so up until the end of the fifth century when it finally fell out of favour after being condemned as un-

received by a slave, named Hermas, who lived in Rome.[315] The most important of these visions is of a woman who later in the text is identified as *Ecclesia*, a personification of the Church who is feeling assailed by the dissension amongst Christian groups.[316]

Ecclesia appears four times in different guises. The first is 'an aged lady in glistening raiment holding a book and seated in a great white chair of snow-white wool'. In the second vision the lady is standing and although her face is youthful her flesh and hair are aged. In the third vision she is youthful and beautiful although her hair is still aged and she is seated on an ivory couch lined with a linen cushion spread with a coverlet of fine linen and flax. Finally in the fourth vision she appears as a 'virgin arrayed as if she were going forth from a bridal-chamber all in white and with white sandals, veiled up to her forehead, and her head-covering consisted of a turban, and her hair was white.'[317] These are strikingly detailed descriptions and yet in Rome, where the text is said to have originated and where the art of personification was so popular, the figure of *Ecclesia* would not become translated into art for another two centuries. It is tempting to think that this may have been due to the continuing 'fractionation' of the Christian communities in Rome with the different *ecclesiae* still in conflict. Taking such conjecture one step further I suggest

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canonical by Pope Gelasius I in 500. The *Codex Sinaiticus*, dated to the middle of the fourth century, contains the oldest complete copy of the New Testament. http://www.codex-sinaiticus.net/en/ accessed 16/1/2008.

[315] The Shepherd of Hermas, *Visions*. Lightfoot, J.L., (trans.). http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.html accessed 16/1/2008. The shepherd is actually the angel of repentance who gives him most of the revelations in the second and third parts of the book.

[316] This was not the first time the Church had been described as a woman in Christian texts. Paul first refers to the *ecclesia* of the Galatians as a woman. He also describes her as symbolizing the New Jerusalem, virgin wife and mother in Galatians 4.21-31. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians 11 -2-4 he describes himself as a paranymphus leading the Church at Corinth as a chaste virgin – to her nuptials with Christ.

[317] Vis. 1.2.2, 2.1.3. Kirby, P. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/shepherd.html accessed 2/1/2006.

that this friction may even have been the inspiration for the story of *The Shepherd of Hermas.* Yet even when the Roman Church began to unify in the fourth century, rather than adopting a female personification for *Ecclesia,* church leaders turned instead to the masculine figures of Peter and Paul to symbolise their universal accord.

However *Ecclesia* would return once more to take her place in a new battle being waged by the Church fathers. This was a war against three very different opponents – heretics, women and Jews. Mary's role in these battles and the part this conflict played in the development of her images will start to become clearer throughout the next three chapters.

Chapter 8

Ambrose – the Father of Mariology?

As we saw in Chapter Six, the increasing prominence of strong-minded ascetic celibate women in the late fourth century had created a crisis of authority for the male leaders of the Roman Church. They had at first attempted to control this by using carefully constructed images of female martyrs to act as role models. This strategy had limited success and the power struggles rumbled on. Then to add to their problems, two clerics started to actively preach against the idea of celibacy. Helvidius, who was said to have been a pupil of Auxentius the Arian Bishop of Milan, and Jovinian, a former ascetic, both claimed that Mary had not remained a virgin after the birth of Christ and that marriage was a good thing. Their campaigns had some success and they even managed to persuade a few priests and consecrated virgins to give up their ascetic lifestyles and marry.[318] In an attempt to deal with this growing crisis, Pope Siricius penned what is generally regarded as the first papal decretal.

Writing to the bishop of Tarragona in 385 he attempted to emphasise the importance of celibacy by once again equating the Church with a female personification. In his very eloquent missive he described *Ecclesia* as a chaste and obedient bride of Christ:

[318] Hunter, D., (1993) 'Helvidius, Jovinian and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome' *JECS* Vol. 1, 47-71; Kelly, J.N.D.,(1998) *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies*, 104-7.

> *(The lord Jesus) wished thus that the figure of the Church, whose bridegroom he is, radiate with the splendor of chastity, so that on the day of judgment when he comes again he can find her without stain and blemish, just as he taught through his Apostle. All we priests and deacons are bound by the unbreakable law of those sanctions, so that from the day of our ordination we subject our hearts and bodies to moderation and modesty in order that in every respect we might please our God in these sacrifices which daily we offer.* [319]

This idea of a union between Christ and *Ecclesia* was first suggested by Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians when he called on husbands to:

> *love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her to make her holy by cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.*[320]

Origen had followed a similar theme when he reinterpreted the allegorical meaning of the *Song of Songs* changing the Jewish message of the love between Shekhinah and Israel to that of Christ and his chosen bride the Church.[321]

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[319] Letter of Pope Siricius to Bishop Himerius of Tarragona. Translation from Somerville, R., and Brasington, B., (1998) Prefaces *to Canon Law Books in Latin Christianity*, 36-39. Siricius was not the first Church leader to adopt this analogy, Cyprian had called the Church 'the Bride of Christ who cannot be adulterous and who is untainted and chaste'. Hippolytus also referred to *Ecclesia* as the bride and spouse of Christ. Plumpe, J.C., (1943) *Mater ecclesia: An inquiry into the concept of the church as mother in early Christianity*, 8, 25, 90, 126. I shall be returning to this analogy in Chapter Nine.

[320] Ephesians 5. 25-28.

[321] Origen*: The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies.* Lawson, R.P., trans., (2002) Ancient Christian Writers, Vol. 26

In fact the image of Christ as bridegroom was one that was not only confined to his marriage with *Ecclesia*.[322] Some years before the Jovinian crisis, bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (328-373) had taken great pride in describing the celibate virgins of his city as 'the brides of Christ'. Writing to them in a rather high handed manner he suggested that they lived their lives like dutiful wives in complete submission to Christ their husband, 'in which their offspring were not children but immortal thoughts'. He was especially proud of his 'brides' and they became an important part of his entourage and his demonstration of power. They were in effect 'human *ex voto*, no longer a woman but a sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord'.[323]

It is clear that Athanasius had a political as well as a spiritual agenda and saw his 'brides' as a weapon in his religious battles. He was fighting to establish a hierarchal church of priests and bishops in Alexandria in opposition to the Arians and other ascetic groups that were springing up in Egypt. By creating the notion of the 'brides of Christ' he made orthodox Christianity more appealing to the celibate women of Alexandria. As an added advantage, once they were consecrated as Christ's brides they would need to behave like obedient wives. As Athanasius was regarded as Christ's representative on earth, he would now have ultimate control over the 'brides'.[324]

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[322] In the apocryphal Gospel of Philip dated to between the second and third centuries, Christian initiation practices were closely linked with the mystery of the bridal chamber with Christ presented as the bridegroom for all initiates both male and female. Pagels, E., (1997) 'Ritual in the Gospel of Philip,' in Turner, J.D., and McGuire, A., (eds.) (1997) *The Nag Hammadi Library after 50 Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoratio*n, 289-291; Pagoulatos, G.P., (2008) *Tracing the Bridegroom in Dura*, 40.

[323] Brown, P., (1988) *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 260.

[324] See Brakke, D., (1995) *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism,* for a detailed discussion on how Athanasius manipulated the role of the ascetic in the Egyptian Church. Athanasius also played a key role in the process of monastic reform. Along with fellow church leaders from Asia Minor such as Basil of Caesarea, he started to segregate mixed communities of ascetics separating men from

Bishop Ambrose of Milan was a contemporary of Athanasius and he also saw the importance of controlling the growing band of celibates in his diocese. When he was appointed bishop in 373, Milan had become the principal Christian centre in the west.[325] As such it became the centre for the *Velatio*, the formal ceremony of the veiling of virgins.[326] Ambrose's role in the *Velatio* was far more powerful than just a minister. He effectively took on the role of *pater familias,* deciding at what age the girl was ready to take the veil, supervising her conduct after the consecration and even acting as her guardian should she become orphaned. To all intents and purposes the consecrated virgins had become Ambrose's 'daughters', an immensely powerful role in the increasingly competitive Church hierarchy.[327]

In order to consolidate his power base the bishop was keen to encourage as many young virgins as possible to take the veil. However his recruitment campaign was beginning to alienate many wealthy Roman families who feared a breakdown in the age old tradition of inheritance of Roman aristocratic wealth.[328] Ambrose needed to find a way to make the concept of celibacy powerful enough to compete against families' resistance. Initially he did this by glamourising and sexualising the role of the early virgin saints, equating the pain of their martyrdom with the consummation

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women and moving them out of the towns into the countryside away from the political and heretical spheres of influences.

[325] From the time of the Tetrachy in the late third century, Rome had begun to lose its status as imperial capital. A number of European cities were used by the western emperors as a base, with Milan becoming the most important and well established. It remained this way up until 402 when Emperor Honorius, fleeing from the threat of Alaric and the Visigoths, established his capital in Ravenna. Bispham, E., and Bowden, W., (2009) *Short Oxford History of Europe - Roman Europe,* 278-279.

[326] Hunter, D., (2003) 'Rereading the Jovinianist Controversy: Asceticism and Clerical Authority in Late Ancient Christianity' *JMEMS 33.3*, 460.

[327] McLynn, N., (1994) *Ambrose of Milan Church and Court in a Christian Capital,* 60-69.

[328] Hunter, D.G., (2002) 'The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine', *CH* Vol. 69, No 2, 289.

of their marriage to Christ.[329] At first he presented Thecla as the ideal role model for virgins.[330] However, like many of his fellow churchmen, he felt uncomfortable with the tales of her preaching and baptising, preferring instead to eulogise on the lives of other more pliable female virgins such as Agnes.[331]

However, even these saints were not able to encapsulate all the virtues and attributes that Ambrose wanted to promote. He needed a more influential role model and rather than mortal virgins he turned instead to the mother of the holy bridegroom – the Virgin Mary. In the process he elevated her from a shadowy figure in the background of the gospels to the premiere female figure in the story of Christianity: a move that would earn him history's epitaph of the 'father of western Mariology'.[332]

Ambrose provided the young virgins in his charge with Mary as a role model, citing her as an example of the reserve and self discipline they would need to keep to their vows. More significantly, he portrayed her as the intermediary between Christ her son and his prospective brides:

[329] See Burrus, V., (1996) 'Equipped for Victory: Ambrose and the Gendering of Orthodoxy', *JECS* 4.4 461-475 and Burrus, V., (1995) 'Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius,' JECS 3: 25-46.
[330] It is clear that Ambrose was reacting to a public popularity for Thecla when he used her as part of his campaign. Indeed, it would have been hard for him to ignore her when Milan's cathedral was dedicated to her as patron of the city.
[331] Hayne, L., (1994) 'Thecla and the Church Fathers' *VigC* Vol. 48, No. 3, 209-218; Ambrose *Book 1 Chapter 4* v. 19, *NPNF 2.* http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.vii.ii.iv.html accessed 30/3/2009.
[332] Graef, H., (1985) *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion,* 77-89.

> *Oh! how many virgins shall she meet, how many shall she embrace and bring to the Lord, and say: "She has been faithful to her espousal, to my Son; she has kept her bridal couch with spotless modesty."* [333]

As well as being a role model for the virgins, Ambrose went on to present Mary as 'a paradigm of Christian conduct for all believers', even going as far as to describe her as *Ecclesiae typos* – 'the type of the Church'.[334]

His elevation of the mother of Jesus to centre stage in the Church's war against heretical ideas was a strategic masterstroke and he continued to use her in his rhetoric right up until his death in 397.[335] By promoting her as the highest example of womanhood Ambrose had already started to lay the foundations for the development of her pictorial image. As Christianity's supreme female figure, she should now have been poised on the brink of artistic glory, yet not a single identifiable portrait of her exists from this high point of Ambrose's devotion.

So why, in spite of Ambrose's endeavours, was Mary's personality not transformed from the printed word to the painted image? It would appear that the fathers of the western church were still not quite ready to welcome her in. There was one more

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[333] Ambrose *Book 2 Chapter 2* v. 16, *NPNF 2* http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf210.iv.vii.iii.ii.html accessed 30/3/2009.

[334] Ambrose was the first church father to describe Mary in this way and in doing so set about moulding the early stages of her individual identity. Gambero, L., (1999) *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin in Patristic Thought*, 13, 191. In fact Mary was not alone in being described as a 'type of the Church'. Yves Congar suggests that all the most important female figures from the Bible had been envisaged as types of the Church under 'one aspect or another'. Congar, Y.M.J., (1954) 'Marie et l'Église dans la Pensée Patristique', *Revue des Sciences Philosophique et Théologique*, 19-21, 25-6.

[335] Ambrose also began to expand on the theme of an Eve-Mary parallel first suggested by Justin Martyr in the second century. Hunter, D., (2003) 'Rereading the Jovinianist Controversy: Asceticism and Clerical Authority in Late Ancient Christianity', *JMEMS* Vol. 33, 3, 459-460; Graef, H., (1985) 77-89; Beattie, T., (2004) *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 150-155, 177-8.

battle to be won before she would finally emerge in all her carefully constructed splendour - a battle that could only be fought in Rome itself.[336]

As the fifth century dawned Alaric the leader of the Visigoths had started his invasion of Italy, capturing much of the southern peninsula. The western emperor Honorius had fled from the approaching barbarians and shored himself up in Ravenna while Rome was left alone and vulnerable. In 410, after 800 years of invincibility, the city was taken, leaving the shock waves to reverberate across the entire Roman Empire.

Although the looting and damage was considerable, the city escaped more severe devastation because the Visigoths were themselves Christians.[337] Over the next two decades the city struggled to recover physically and emotionally, then in 432 a new and ambitious bishop ascended to the papal throne. Known as Sixtus III (432-440) he took control of the city both theologically and politically. One of his first tasks was the dedication of the impressive new basilica church of Santa Sabina built during the reign of his predecessor Celestine I (422-432).

[336] The British Museum has a series of four carved ivory reliefs said to be from Rome featuring a Passion narrative unprecedented in early Christian art and dated to between 420-30. The reliefs may have formed part of a reliquary casket and the crucifixion scene shows two figures identified as Mary and John who were said to have stood at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). There is no question that this heavily veiled woman was intended to represent the mother of Jesus, however I would argue that this is very much a generic image from a narrative scene rather than an individual portrait. Indeed the companion scene of the women at the tomb shows two heavily veiled female figures who are completely indistinguishable from the Mary figure. Volbach, W.F., and Hirmer, M., (1961) *Early Christian Art*, 329-30, fig. 98; Spier, J., (ed.) (2008) *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 229-232, fig. 57B and 57C.

[337] Heather, P., (2006) *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, 151.

Although the church had been built during Celestine's papacy it had actually been funded by a mysterious Illyrian presbyter called Peter.[338] The original mosaics of the triumphal arch and the apse have not survived, however the sixteenth century fresco that now adorns the apse may have preserved the essence of the original mosaic design, a triumphant adult Christ figure, independent of his mother and flanked by his apostles (**Fig. 106**).[339] Bisconti suggests that these designs paralleled the developing artistic programmes of the other churches that were springing up across the city. However, I contend that not all of Santa Sabina's decorative schemes were part of the developing Roman cultural milieu. The remaining decoration on the inside of the entrance wall is in an entirely original artistic language, one I believe presents the first stage in the development of Mary's visual iconography **(Fig. 107).**[340]

The decoration is made up of a mosaic dedicatory inscription flanked by two female figures. The inscription reads:

When Celestinus held the highest apostolic throne and shone forth gloriously as the foremost bishop of the whole world, a presbyter of the city, Illyrian by birth, named Peter and worthy of that great name, established this

[338] It has been suggested that Santa Sabina was named after the woman who had once owned a villa on it site on the Aventine Hill. She had apparently opened her home as a house church during the persecutions. Mâle, E., (1960) *The Early Churches of Rome*, 50-51.
[339] The apse fresco depicts the figure of Christ seated on a mountain and flanked either side by male and female saints with clerical figures in the foreground. The triumphal arch mosaic was in place until at least 1690 when it was drawn by Giovanni Ciampini and later reinterpreted according to this drawing. It was made up of 15 or 17 medallion portraits set around the archway. The central medallion contained the bust portrait of Christ, flanked on either side by bust-length figures of what may have been a combination of apostles, evangelists and saints. On the right and left sides of the triumphal arch appeared the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, with eight doves between them, flying towards the centre of the arch. Balass, G., *Taddeo Zuccaro's Fresco in the Apse-Conch in S. Sabina, Rome.* http://www.tau.ac.il/arts/projects/PUB/assaph-art/assaph4/articles_assaph4/balas.pdf accessed 1/10/2009; Bisconti, F., (1999) 'Early Christian Art' in Bussagli, M., (ed.) (1999) *Rome Art & Architecture*, 207-208.
[340] Bisconti, (1999), 207.

building at which you look in wonder. From his earliest years he was brought up in the hall of Christ - rich to the poor, poor to himself, one who shunned the good things of life on earth and deserved to hope for the life to come.[341]

The dedication itself is an acknowledgement that the building had been funded by a donation from Peter the Illyrian during the pontificate of Celestine I. However, the figures that flank the words are entirely unique and intriguing **(Fig 108).**[342] They are both standing females, heavily veiled and draped in dark coloured robes and holding open books. Although they appear to be wearing identical white tunics with tightly fitting long sleeves, dalmatica in a similar dark shade and matching red shoes, their mantles and headwear are markedly different.

The figure on the left of the dedication is identified by the inscription *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* while the one on the right by the words *Ecclesia ex Gentibus.* Although there are no other examples of female figures similarly identified, most scholars agree that the women are intended to represent personifications of the Church of the Gentiles and the Church of the Jews, a composition alluding to the Jewish and Gentile origins of the Universal Church.[343]

The figure of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* is depicted wearing a white padded head roll while her mantle, with its ends decorated with gold embroidery, is loosely draped

[341] CVLMEN APOSTOLICVM CVM CAELISTINUS HABERET
PRIMUS ET IN TOTO FVLGERET EPISCOPVS ORBE
HAEC QVAE MIRARIS FVNDAVIT PRESBYTER VRBIS
ILLRYICA DE GENTE PETRVS VIR NOMINE TANTO
DIGNVS AB EXORTV CHRISTI NVTRITVS IN AVLA
PAVPERIBVS LOCVPLES SIBI PAVPER QVI BONA VITAE
PRAESENTIS FVGIENS MERVIT SPERARE FVTVRVM
[342] Oakeshott, W., (1967) *The Mosaics of Rome*, 62.
[343] Bisconti (1999), 207; Mâle, 49; Oakeshott, 89-90.

over it in the traditional Roman manner. In her left hand she holds a folded white napkin or *mappa* beneath an open book. Although the text on the book is illegible, it appears to represent a style of cursive writing with the pages stitched together in a way that indicates that the book is bound between a wooden book cover. With her right hand she has two fingers extended pointing toward the book.

The opposite figure of *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione*, wears a hooded mantle that appears to be pinned to a white bonnet worn underneath. The ends of the mantle are decorated with gold oval panels with a black cross outlined inside. In her left hand she holds a book with the pages stitched inside a leather binding. The text, also illegible, is more spaced in the style of Semitic writing. Like her fellow *ecclesia* she is also gesturing toward the book with her right hand. Extended pointing figures are usually interpreted as a gesture of speech **(Fig 109)** suggesting that the women are expounding on the contents of their respective books – the Old and New Testaments.[344]

The inscriptions beneath each figure would seem to confirm Bisconti's identification that the women represent the two aspects of the Universal Church. However, I am not convinced that their role in the dedicatory panel was quite so straightforward.[345] In fact I believe that these two solitary figures can unlock the

[344] Salvadori, S.M., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, 492.

[345] I suggest that there is a separate depiction of the Universal church that can be found carved on panel of the fifth century cedar wood doors of the church. The panel has been identified as a representation of the Ascension. It shows two men standing either side of a woman who is looking upward past the sun and moon and five stars to a figure of Christ in a circle flanked by alpha and omega symbols and surrounded by the emblems of the four evangelists. Although the two men are usually identified as Peter and Paul, the identification of the woman, over whose head they appear to be holding an encircled cross, veers between *ecclesia* and Mary. Neither Mary nor Paul was present at the ascension, so the scene must have been intended to be more symbolic than narrative. My suggestion is that this single female figure was a symbol of the Universal Church with Peter and Paul

puzzle as to why Mary's image had still not appeared in the artistic programmes of Rome's churches.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Six, by the fourth century Peter and Paul had become the designated symbols of the Gentile and Jewish roots of the Roman Church. Indeed, by the fifth century they were taking pride of place either side of Christ in the apse mosaics of the city's newest church buildings. Such prominence can be seen in the apse of the Church of Santa Pudenziana constructed in around 390 **(Fig. 110)**.[346]

Instead of being a replacement for St. Peter and St. Paul, I suggest that the *ecclesiae* figures at Santa Sabina were added to the dedicatory panel to acknowledge the roots of Peter the Illyrian himself rather than those of the Roman Church. The dedication states that from his 'earliest years he (Peter) was brought up in the hall of Christ'. I propose that this wording suggests that Peter had not been born a gentile Christian; indeed it may suggest that he was a converted Jew. The figures of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* and *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* could therefore be seen as symbols of Peter's own roots in the communities of the uncircumcised gentiles and the circumcised Jews. The *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* figure could therefore be seen as

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representing its Jewish and gentile roots. For detailed discussions on the interpretations and dating of the various panels of the doors see Coburn Soper, A., (1938) 'The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art,' *The AB*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 145-192; Kantorowicz, E.H., (1944) 'The 'King's Advent': And The Enigmatic Panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina,' *AB*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 207-23; Delbruck, R., (1952) 'Notes on the Wooden Doors of Santa Sabina', *AB*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 139-145; Morey, C. R., (1953) *Early Christian Art: An Outline of Style and Iconography in Sculpture and Painting from Antiquity to the Eighth Century*, 13; Mâle, 49-59.

[346] Peter and Paul are shown being crowned by two women who, in the absence of an inscription, have also been dubbed *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex gentibus*. For a full discussion on this theory see Schlatter, F.W., and S.J., (1995) 'The Two Women in the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana', *JECA* Vol. 3, 1-24.

a forerunner for the personification of *Synagoga,* an image that would become popular during the medieval period.[347]

Going one step further, I also contend that Peter's *ecclesiae* figures were designed to convey another more controversial visual message. Their veiling is heavy and restricting and unlike the final appearance of *Ecclesia* in the *Shepherd of Hermas,* there is nothing triumphant or radiant about their demeanour. *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* wears the style of hooded mantle adopted by widows in the eastern empire. *Ecclesia ex Gentibus'* dark coloured pallium is the typical dress of a widowed Roman matron. I believe in the same way that Hermas' *Ecclesia* had been aged by the fractionation within the third century Christian communities in Rome; these *ecclesiae* have been portrayed as mourning the growing spectre of anti-Judaism.

Since the legalisation of Christianity in the early fourth century, anti-Jewish feeling had been gradually overwhelming the empire. Indeed, by the time the mosaics of Santa Sabina had been created, Roman Jews were being publicly labelled 'beasts and madmen', with the Jewish population in the city being systematically suppressed.[348] Many church leaders condoned this anti-Jewish attitude and promoted the idea that Judaism had existed only as a preparation for Christianity.[349]

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[347] Skarsaune, O., & Hyalyik, R., (2007) *Jewish believers in Jesus: the early centuries*, 216. Throughout the middle ages the female figures *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* were used in the west to symbolise the victorious Church and defeated Synagogue. They were popular in both manuscript illuminations and church sculpture where *Ecclesia* was usually depicted as a beautiful maiden, crowned and holding the cross whilst the defeated *Synagoga* was blindfolded (symbolizing blindness to the truth of the New Testament) and dejectedly bearing a broken staff and broken tablets of the Old Testament. Claman, H.N., (2000) *Jewish Images in the Christian Church.*

[348] Miles, M.R., (1993) 'Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews', *HTR*, Vol. 86, 168.

[349] Ibid.

Augustine the bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential theologians of the day produced a striking indictment on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity when he claimed:

> *The Jew carried the book from which the Christian takes his faith. They have become our librarians, like slaves who carry books behind Their masters; the slaves gain no profit by their carrying, but the masters Profit by their reading.*[350]

Just a few years after the completion of Santa Sabina, work would commence on the construction of another Roman church. This would be built near the ruined basilica of Liberius on the summit of the Esquiline Hill.[351] On completion it was said to have been named after Mary, Rome's first church to be dedicated to mother of Jesus. Nowadays it is known as Santa Maria Maggiore.

Many scholars maintain that the church's decorative scheme was designed to celebrate Mary's new role as *Theotokos* following on from the rulings of the Council of Ephesus.[352] Others suggest that it was actually intended as a public

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[350] Ibid, 162.

[351] The legend that the church was first built by Pope Liberius (352-356) following an apparition of the Virgin Mary and a miraculous fall of snow probably dates no earlier than the thirteenth century. The church was said to have been known as both Santa Maria ad Nives and Santa Maria *Liberiana* It was later named Santa Maria *Del Presepe* after a relic of the crib that was lodged there. Its final name of Santa Maria *Maggiore* came about because it is the largest of the twenty-six churches in Rome that are now dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Webb, M., (2001) *Churches and Catacombs of Rome,* 59: Miles, 157-159.

[352] According to the *Liber Pontificalis,* Sixtus 'built the basilica of the holy Mary, which was called by the ancients the basilica of Liberius'. However, Krautheimer cautions against putting too great a store to any reference of this dedication. He suggests that the *Liber Pontificalis'* version of the Life of Sixtus III is unreliable because it was 'a result of later compilations'. Loomis, L.R., (trans.) (1916) *The Book of Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 93-94**;** Davis, R., (2000) *The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis): The Ancient Biographies of the First Ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715***,** xxxvii, xxxix, xli, 37:7, 46:3,7, 48:1,11, 49:1, 51:1, 53:2,9, 55:7, 75:2, 76:6, 77:2, 81:18, 86:18; Krautheimer, R., (1942) 'Recent Publications on S. Maria Maggiore in Rome' *AJA,* Vol. 46, 374 n.6.

announcement of papal power in the aftermath of Alaric's Sack of Rome in 410 and the retreat of the western emperor to Ravenna.[353]

A far more controversial viewpoint has been presented by Margaret Miles. She maintains that rather than a tribute to Mary, the artists of S. Maria Maggiore had been tasked with designing a mosaic programme with a blatant message of anti-Jewishness. I shall be considering this theory and its implications for Marian imagery in the next chapter.[354]

[353] Emile Mâle in his description of the early churches of Rome, credits Rossi as the first scholar to suggest that the apse and triumphal arch mosaics had been designed by Sixtus as a means of celebrating Mary's 'supernatural splendour'. However Mâle makes the point that it is the Christ Child rather than Mary who appears to be the principal subject portrayed. Mâle, (1960), 60-68. For a more recent discussion on the importance of Christ see Sieger, J.D., (1987) 'Visual Metaphor as Theology: Leo the Great's Sermons on the Incarnation and the Arch Mosaics at S. Maria Maggiore', *Gesta*, Vol. 26. No 2, 83-91. Early studies of the mosaics were made by Richter, J.P. and Taylor, A.C., (1904) *The Golden Age of Classic Christian Art* and Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert.* The most comprehensive studies of the mosaics are still Brenk, B., (1975) *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rom* and Cecchelli, C., (1956) *I Mosaici della basilica di S. Maria Maggiore.* Oakeshott, W., (1967) *The Mosaics of Rome*, 73-90 provides a thorough description of the artistic programme of the nave and arch mosaics; Deckers, J.G., (1976) *Der alttestamentliche Zyklus von S. Maria Maggiore in Rom*; Kitzinger, E., (1995) *Byzantine Art in the Making*, 66. For a more controversial view point see Spain S., (1977) 'Carolingian Restorations of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome', *Gesta*, XVI, 13-22; Spain (1979) 'The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore' *AB*, Vol. 61, 518-40 and Spain, (1983) 'The Restorations of the Sta. Maria Maggiore Mosaics', *AB*, Vol. 65, 325-328 in response to Nordhagen P.J., (1983) 'The Archaeology of Wall Mosaics: A Note on the Mosaics in Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome, *AB*, Vol. 65, 323-324.

[354] Miles, 155-175.

Chapter 9

Ecclesiae in Conflict and the Gentile Bride

The church of S. Maria Maggiore sits in glorious splendour on the summit of the Esquiline Hill in Rome. Today the only visible early Christian features within the church are the fifth century mosaics in the nave and on the triumphal arch which were said to have been commissioned by Pope Sixtus III (432-40) **(Fig. 111).**[355] As we saw in the last chapter, despite the fact that the church is dedicated to Mary, controversy still surrounds the suggestion that the triumphal arch mosaics were designed to promulgate the pronouncements from the Council of Ephesus in 431.[356]

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[355] The apse mosaic which was said to have featured Mary enthroned with Jesus on her lap, was replaced in the thirteenth century with a mosaic of Jesus crowning Mary as Queen of Heaven. This was said to have been done in order to accommodate a new transept. Despite this renovation and centuries of other changes, repairs and restoration work, the original mosaics from the nave and the triumphal arch are said to have survived relatively intact. The words *Xystvs Episcopvs Plebi Dei* inscribed over the centre of the triumphal arch mosaics are the only texts still in place. However, although Sixtus III's original dedication is lost, the wording has apparently been preserved in medieval syllogae, although this may have been a later invention:

Mary Virgin, to thee I sixtus, dedicate this new abode:
A fitting offering to thy womb, the bearer of salvation.
Though, O Mother, knowing no man yet bearing fruit
Brought from they chaste womb the Saviour of us all.
Behold, the witnesses of thy fruitfulness bring thee wreaths,
At each one's feet the instruments of his passion:
Sword and fire and water, wild beasts and bitter poison yet
One crown awaits these several deaths.

Spain S., (1979) 'The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore' *AB* 61, 532 and n. 68 and Cecchelli, C., (1956) *I Mosaici della basilica di S. Maria Maggiore*, 200-1. Brenk and Krautheimer suggest that it may have been Sixtus' advisor and successor Leo I who designed the mosaic programme. Brenk, B., (1975) *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rom,* 39, 46; Krautheimer, R., (2000) *Rome Profile of a City, 312-1308,* 51. See also Wellen, G.A., (1961) *Theotokos*: *Eine Ikonographische Abhandlung uber das Gottesmutterbild in fruhchristlicher Zeit* , 93-138.

[356] Although one of the key edicts to come from the Council of Ephesus was the confirmation that Mary should be known as *Theotokos* or 'god-bearer' there is still considerable debate as to the real significance of the title. For the most recent discussions on the meaning of *Theotokos* see Boss S.J.,

Whatever their inspiration there is no doubt that the mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore were an extraordinary artistic achievement. In his great opus on the architecture of Rome, Richard Krautheimer writes that they are among 'the great manifestations of Christian antiquity'. He goes on to describe one of the four mosaic tableaux said to portray Mary as depicting:

> *…..an empress graciously walking behind her divine Son and attended by a suite of angels and Joseph to meet the reception committee come to greet her.*[357]

Krautheimer was referring to a scene usually identified as the Holy Family meeting Aphrodosius the governor of Sotinen-Hermopolis in Egypt (**Figs. 112, 112a & b**).[358] In each of the other three tableaux (**Figs. 113, 114 & 115**), the figure identified as Mary is depicted in a similar way. She is dressed in an elaborately embroidered golden palla wrapped around an undertunic with full white sleeves and embroidered cuffs. To finish off the effect she wears a wide jewelled neck collar, earrings of precious stones and on her belt a buckle studded with gems. Her head is unveiled and her hair is swept up and secured in a style of bun on top of which sits a

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(2007) 'The Title Theotokos' , 50 -56 and Price, R.M., (2007) 'Theotokos: The Title and its Significance in Doctrine and Devotion' in Boss (ed.) *Mary: The Complete Resource*; Price, (2008) 'The Theotokos and the Council of Ephesus', 89-105 in Maunder, C., (ed.) *The Origin of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. It is also worth noting that although Constantinople was the centre for the *Theotokos* controversy, no images of Mary have been discovered in the eastern empire dating from this time.

[357] Krautheimer , R., (2000), 49.

[358] The problem with this identification is that the source of the legend was the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, a Latin compilation based on the Protevangelium and the Gospel of Thomas, but not usually dated to before the end of the sixth century and more often to the eighth or ninth centuries. Spain also makes the point that including details from apocryphal gospels in a work sponsored by the Pope would have been inconceivable 'given the caution with which the popes treated the canonical corpus of biblical writings'. Spain, S., (1979), 518-40.

jewelled diadem.[359] This style of costume has traditionally been described as the dress of *Maria Regina* and is not only striking in its elegance, but in the context of early Marian art almost entirely unique.[360] Understanding the significance of this dress is, I suggest, the key to deciphering the meaning behind the mosaic cycle on the triumphal arch.

Ironically, it was one of Krautheimer's students, Suzanne Spain, who first challenged the *Maria Regina* identification. Spain dubbed the figure 'the woman in gold' and suggested that rather than Mary, the woman was in fact the Old Testament figure of Sarah the wife of Abraham.[361] She then went on to claim that it was the heavily veiled woman appearing in two other scenes on the arch who was really intended to represent Mary (**Figs. 114 & 114a – 115 & 115a**).

Her reasoning was detailed and carefully presented but, as regards the history of Marian iconography, entirely flawed. She states with confidence that by the time the arch was created Mary's iconography was all but standardised:

> *The testimonies of Early Christian and Byzantine iconography declare this portrayal to be the traditional and universal type of Mary. The number of*

[359] Despite recent restoration work the key images used for reference on the mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore are still the photographs commissioned in 1916 by the archaeologist Joseph Wilpert and coloured by the watercolour artist Carlo Tabanelli. Published by Joseph Wilpert, in *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert* . The photographs went on to form part of an exhibition in Rome in 2000 and were featured in the accompanying book by Nestori, A., and Bisconti, F., (2000) *I Mosaici Paleocristiani di Santa Maria Maggiore Negli Acquarelli Della Collezion Wilpert.* The mosaics were cleaned in the late 1990s in time for the Millennium celebration in Rome.

[360] There are no surviving examples in Rome of images of Mary wearing an imperial crown that can be dated before the eighth century. The two earliest examples are a mosaic dated to 706 from the oratory of John VII in St Peter's but removed in the seventeenth century, and a panel painting known as *Madonna della Clemenza* from Santa Maria in Trastevere and dated to between 705-707. Rubery, E., 'Pope John VII's Devotion to Mary: Papal Images of Mary from the fifth to the early eighth centuries' in Maunder, C., (ed.) (2008) *The Origin of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 155-192.

[361] Spain, (1979), 518-540.

> *Maries of this type are countless, the exceptions few indeed. In a host of icons, mosaics, frescoes, manuscripts, textiles, tapestries, metalwork, sculpture and ivories, Mary is portrayed in a manner virtually identical to her appearance in the two scenes on the triumphal arch in S. Maria Maggio*re.[362]

To emphasise this point Spain cites a series of examples, none of which are dated to earlier than the second half of the sixth century. In fact, no Marian icon has yet been discovered that can be dated to earlier than the sixth or seventh centuries.[363] As the mosaics of the triumphal arch were created some time between 432 and 440, there is nearly a century between the S. Maria Maggiore images and the examples she quotes. Indeed, far from being standardised, I suggest that the iconography of Mary was in its very early stages of development when the mosaics at S. Maria Maggiore were being created.

Spain goes on to claim that Mary is depicted in just two scenes on the triumphal arch. The first time is in a tableau usually described as the Presentation in the Temple, but identified by Spain as a representation of Mary's betrothal to Joseph.[364] The woman she claims to be Mary is normally identified as the ancient prophetess Anna. This figure wears a grey or dark coloured tunic edged with reddish brown clavi. Around her body and over her head a mantle is loosely draped exposing the faint outline of a dark coloured head-dress **(Fig. 115a)**.[365] Mary's second

[362] Ibid, 530- 534.
[363] For the most recent scholarship on this see Cormack, R., (2005) 'Virgin & Child' and accompanying bibliography in Temple, R., (ed.) *Masterpieces of Early Christian Art and Icons*, 22-29.
[364] Spain, (1979), 518-540.
[365] Anna was an 84 year old widow who worshipped every day at the temple. Luke 2:21-38.

appearance, according to Spain, is as the veiled figure in a scene usually identified as a depiction of the Adoration of the Magi (**Fig. 114a**). She wears a gold coloured tunic and is heavily veiled under a dark coloured mantle which is draped around her body. Peeping out from beneath her robes are red shoes.

The outline of the veil suggests that her hair may have been piled high on her head and enclosed within a cap. However, Spain's description of 'hair bound in a white cap' is confusing as all that can be seen is the voluminous mantle covering the whole head and pulled down almost as far as the woman's eyebrows.[366] Her chin rests on her right hand as she looks pensively into space holding a white cloth or *mappa* in her left hand.

Although it is usually described as an Adoration scene, the composition of this tableau is unique in Christian art. The young Christ sits alone, elaborately enthroned and flanked on the left by the female figure Spain calls the 'woman in gold', while on the right is the mysterious veiled woman.[367] The magi approach him individually, two on the right and one on the left. Behind the magus on the left stands a solitary male figure.[368] Four angels stand guard behind the throne and above Jesus' head shines an eight pointed star.

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[366] Spain, (1979) 534.

[367] The identity of the mystery veiled women has puzzled scholars for more than a century, with suggestions ranging from Mary herself to the figure of a Sibyl. Carlo Cecchelli regarded her as Divine Wisdom and Marie-Louise Thérel saw her as a Sibyl. Cechelli, C., and Thérel, M.L., (1962) 'Une Image de la Sibylle sur l'arc triumphal de Sta Maria Maggiore', *CA* 12, 153-171. For a compilation of the key theories see Künzle, P., (1961-62) 'Per una visione organica dei mosaici antichi di S. Maria Maggiore', *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia Rendiconti*, ser. III, xxxiv, 153-190.

[368] This figure is often identified as Joseph but it has been heavily restored over the centuries see Spain (1977).

I will return to the identity of the mysterious veiled woman later, but first I would like to consider in more detail the iconography of Spain's 'woman in gold' (**Figs. 112b, 113, 114 & 115b)**. In order to make her case for identifying this woman as Sarah, Spain is dismissive of the idea that the mosaicists were depicting Mary in imperial garb as *Maria Regina*. To prove her point she cites the lack of crown with long pendulia as her prime piece of evidence.[369]

Although the empress Licinia Eudoxia (422-462), wife of Valentinian III, is depicted wearing a style of pendulia in a portrait medallion (**Fig. 116**) no other examples of similar imperial crowns appear again until the middle of the sixth century.[370] In fact empresses in the fifth century were remarkably informal in their dress. We have examples from statues and steelyard weights of this period that depict the empress looking elegant rather than imperial (**Figs. 117 & 118**).[371]

Even though I believe that the 'woman in gold' is dressed in a similar style to a fifth century empress, I do not believe the mosaic artists of S. Maria Maggiore had intended to portray her in that role. It is certainly apparent that they were tasked with dressing her in an elaborate and expensive costume, but I suggest that the inspiration for this design came from a more spiritual and less imperial source. Spain points out the similarity between 'the woman in gold' and three more female

[369] Spain, (1979), 530. *Pendulia* sometimes called prependulia were jewelled chains suspended from the lower edge of an imperial crown.
[370] One of the most famous examples is the mosaic panel of empress Theodora from the church of S. Vitale in Ravenna executed around 548. See also Stout, A.M., (2001) 'Jewelry as a Symbol of Status in the Roman Empire' in Sebesta, J.L., and Bonfante, L., (eds.) *The World of Roman Costume,* 77-100; Empresses from both the western and eastern parts of the empire dressed in a similar style. For an excellent overview on the imagery of early empresses see McClanan A., (2002) *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses*. .
[371] Steelyard weights featuring the emperor and empress were very common. The imperial images were filled with lead and acted as a counterweight. See McClanan, (2002), 31-62 for a description of steelyard weights; James, L., (2001) *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, 27.

figures in the nave mosaics. Although she notes the similarity of their dress she completely misses the more obvious link between the women, evidenced by the Biblical storylines illustrated in two of the nave panels.[372]

Each mosaic panel in the nave is divided into a double register and presents different scenes from the Old Testament. The first set of panels appears on the south west side of the nave and illustrates scenes from the life of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the first panel we can see in the top register Jacob arguing with Laban who has tricked him into marrying Leah. In the lower register, Jacob has finally been able to marry Rachel and this is their wedding scene **(Fig. 119).**[373] Jacob, rather inappropriately dressed in his shepherd's outfit, is clasping hands with his new bride in the manner of a Roman wedding ceremony or *dextrarum iunctio*, with Rachel's father Laban overseeing proceedings.[374] Although only Rachel's head and the top part of her body survive, we can see that her wedding finery is very similar in design to that of 'the woman in gold' with the full white sleeves of her tunic peeping out from under her elaborate palla. She also wears a transparent white veil that appears to be pinned to the back of her head. It is hard to tell accurately from the Wilpert colourised photograph, but it seems that the tesserae used for the figure are a similar shade to those of the 'woman in gold' on the triumphal arch. Rachel's wedding robe is noticeably different from the dress she wears in two of the other surviving scenes. In the neighbouring fragmented panel (**Fig. 120),** we can see her

[372] Spain, (1979), 530.
[373] I am using the same numbering used in Oakeshott, W., (1967) *The Mosaics of Rome,* 85-88. 27 of the original 42 mosaics panels remain in the nave, although some are damaged. They represent scenes from the Old Testament and feature moments of covenant and promise between God and the Hebrew people.
[374] The *dextrarum iunctio* was the 'joining of right hands', a handclasp that has its origins in the pagan era. As the right hand was sacred to Fides, the god of fidelity, it was used to confirm the agreement of a contract**.**

standing between her father Laban and older sister Leah. Then in the top panel of (**Fig. 119)** we can see her dressed in a similar outfit in the scene where Jacob demands her hand in marriage after having been tricked into marrying her elder sister. In both these scenes, she wears a reddish full-length belted dalmaticus decorated with vertical purple clavi stripes.[375] She is also unveiled with her hair pinned up and wears a jewelled collar necklace.

On the north east side of the nave, the mosaic cycle begins with scenes from the life of Moses. One of the most striking of these scenes is that of his marriage to Zipporah, with the ceremony taking place under the traditional huppah or canopy overseen by the bride's father Jethro **(Fig. 121).** Zipporah is dressed in the same style as both 'the woman in gold' and Rachel, with full white sleeves appearing beneath an elaborately embroidered golden palla carefully wrapped around her body. Like Rachel she has a white veil pinned to the back of her head with her hair piled neatly in a bun.[376] The other women in the group are dressed in a similar style to Rachel's older sister Leah (**Figs. 120 & 119).** Leah was of course at this point already married to Jacob and, like her, they all wear dark coloured dalmatica with mantles draped around their shoulders. Instead of a veil, their heads are bound in a white turban or headband, a style of headdress I suggest indicates their marital status.[377]

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[375] The dalmaticus was a day to day costume worn by both men and women in the fifth century, sometimes loose and sometimes belted. Croom, A.T. (2000) *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 83-87.

[376] Of the three women in Zipporah's entourage one is dressed in a near identical fashion, but without a veil. It was traditional in Roman weddings for the bridesmaid to wear the same dress as the bride as a way of confusing the evil spirits that were thought to prey on newlyweds. http://www.explore-italian-culture.com/ancient-roman-weddings.html accessed 30/3/2009.

[377] In the early third century Tertullian railed against women who:

> *with their turbans and woollen bands, do not veil their head, but bind it up; protected, indeed, in front, but, where the head properly lies, bare. Others are to a certain extent covered over the region of the brain with linen coifs of small dimensions ... and not reaching quite to the ears,*

Using Rachel and Zipporah's wedding scenes as evidence, I suggest that the golden costumes described by Spain as 'garb characteristically worn by the upper-class woman in the late antique and early Byzantine period' are actually depictions of the traditional wedding dress of the Late Antique period.

A handful of commemorative gold glass bowls, dated to the fourth century and earlier, all appear to feature a bride and groom being crowned as part of the wedding ceremony (**Fig. 122)**.[378] Although they only show the figures from the waist upwards it is possible to see that, although unveiled, the brides are dressed in a similar style to the S. Maria Maggiore women. An even clearer example of wedding finery can be found on the magnificent Projecta Casket. This beautifully embellished silver gilt toilet casket, dated to around 380, is said to have been a wedding gift for a wealthy Christian women named Projecta who is depicted on the lid alongside her new husband (**Fig. 123).**[379]

In the light of this evidence I suggest an entirely new reading for the mosaic cycle at S. Maria Maggiore, one that takes us back to the writings of Hippolytus in the third century:

Tertullian**,** 'An Appeal to Married Women' in Tertullian (2004) *On the Veiling of Virgins*, Chapter XVII, 30.
In the scene where Jacob tells his two wives how God had commanded him to return to the land of his ancestors, Rachel now wears the same style of turban as her sister, indicating that she is now also a married matron . While a study of the headwear of married women in the late antique period is beyond the scope of this thesis, I suggest that the mosaic cycles of S. Maria Maggiore provide a rare insight into this under researched subject. Rather than being permanently veiled, the married women in the mosaics appear to wear their hair encased in turbans or bonnets while going about their day-to-day business, but pull their mantles up over their heads when the occasion demands.
[378] See Vikan, G., (1990) 'Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium' *DOP*, Vol. 44, 145-163.
[379] Buckton, D., (1994) *Byzantium: Treasures of Byzantine Art & Culture*, 33-34.

> *'Let the days', says he, 'of the mourning for my father come on, that I may slay my brother.' Wherefore Rebecca—that is, patience—told her husband of the brother's plot: who, summoning Jacob, bade him go to Mesopotamia and thence take a wife of the family of Laban the Syrian, his mother's brother. As therefore Jacob, to escape his brother's evil designs, proceeds to Mesopotamia, so Christ, too, constrained by the unbelief of the Jews, goes into Galilee, to take from thence to Himself a bride from the Gentiles, His Church.*[380]

Rather than Mary or Sarah, I suggest that S. Maria Maggiore's 'woman in gold' was originally intended to be a representation of the figure of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus*, the Church of the gentiles dressed as the bride of Christ. Although this meaning has become obscured during centuries of restoration work, we can still find evidence that this may have been the case thanks to a seventeenth century drawing of the triumphal arch by Marco Tullio Montagna (**Fig. 124)**.[381]

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[380] Hippolytus, quoted in Jerome, Epist. 36, *ad Damasum*, Num. xviii, *ANF*. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iv.i.ii.iii.html accessed 30 March 2009. Justin Martyr had also linked the story of Jacob with that of Christ, suggesting that Leah was a representation of Synagogue and Rachel *Ecclesia*.

> *The marriages of Jacob were types of that which Christ was about to accomplish. For it was not lawful for Jacob to marry two sisters at once. And he serves Laban for [one of] the daughters; and being deceived in [the obtaining of] the younger, he again served seven years. Now Leah is your people and synagogue; but Rachel is our Church.*

Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter CXXXIV, *ANF*. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.viii.iv.cxxxiv.html accessed 30/3/2009.

[381] Montagna had been commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Barberini to record the appearance of the mosaics in around 1640. He sketched the arch first in pencil and then went over his drawing in ink and wash colours. A century later Benedict XIII (1724-1730) had the mosaics of the triumphal arch cleaned and restored as did Benedict XIV (1743-1750) and there is no doubt that a substantial amount of work was done on the mosaics. Although the mosaics were cleaned at the end of the 1990s, the most recent extensive repairs took place between 1929-1931 and 1936-1940 during the papacy of Pius XI and under the direction of Biagio Biagetti with Giorgio Pianigiani. Spain, S., (1983) 'The Restorations of the Sta. Maria Maggiore Mosaics', *AB*, Vol. 65, No.2, 326.

This drawing provides a selection of different views of the arch mosaics. Starting first of all with the scene usually interpreted as the Annunciation **(Fig. 113),** most scholars agree that this was intended to be a depiction of the Annunciation inspired by the narrative from the *Protevangelium of James***.**[382] In this version of the story Mary is said to have been spinning purple thread for the veil of the temple when the angel Gabriel arrived.[383] However the six angels that feature in the mosaic make it hard to accept the suggestion that this is a depiction of a simple Annunciation scene.[384] What I believe we are seeing instead is *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* enthroned and surrounded by a guard of angels. Rather than a basket of wool, I suggest she was originally portrayed holding a scroll with a large container or *capsa* full of extra scrolls by her feet. Indeed the Montagna sketch (**Fig. 124)** appears to confirm this

[382] The Annunciation scene where the Virgin is spinning wool for the temple is found in the Protevangelium of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. While the Protevangelium is dated to the second half of the second century, Pseudo-Matthew was probably first compiled in around the sixth century. Elliott, J.K. (2005) *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation.* 48-67 and 84-99. Spain makes the point that at the time the mosaics were commissioned the apocrypha were being suppressed by the bishops of Rome so it is unlikely that they would have chosen this interpretation of the story for the church's triumphal arch. She also makes the point that the whole scene was an *ad hoc* creation without precedent and that a variety of preparatory sketches had been discovered beneath the mosaic suggesting that the artists had been experimenting on the job. Spain, (1979), 538, n.85, 539.

[383] An ivory diptych/book cover from Milan dated to the second half of the fifth century contains two scenes also said to have been inspired by apocryphal texts that feature a woman dressed in a similar fashion to 'the woman in gold'. The first scene has been interpreted as the angel Gabriel approaching Mary as she draws water from a stream and the second scene is said to show the angel escorting her to the temple. The figure of Mary also appears in an Adoration and nativity scene where she is heavily veiled. The temple scene is generally assumed to have been inspired by the 'ordeal by bitter waters' story and this is only found in Pseudo Matthew and even then features neither angel nor star. I suggest there are some dating issues still to be resolved with this diptych. If the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew is its source then it is likely to have been produced far later than the end of the fifth century. Indeed its iconography has also been linked with that of the Werden Casket in the V. & A., in London, once also thought to have been made in the fifth century, but now regarded as a ninth century Carolingian work. Volbach, W.F., and Hirmer, M., (1961) Early *Christian Art,* 330; Spier, J., (ed.) (2008) *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art,* 256-258, fig 76A.

[384] It is interesting to note that the author of the Shepherd of Hermas describes six holy angels who are building a tower meant to symbolise the Church:

> *These are the holy angels of God, that were created first of all, unto whom the Lord delivered all His creation to increase and to build it, and to be masters of all creation.*

4(12):1 The Shepherd of Hermas, *Visions*. Lightfoot, J.L., trans. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/shepherd-lightfoot.html accessed 16/1/2008.

was the case.[385] The Montagna sketch also omits the over-large dove depicted careering towards to the seated woman.[386]

To the left and right of the seated woman are two brick buildings that superficially follow a similar design to the edifices depicted in various scenes in the nave mosaics (**Fig. 119)**. However, the building on the left has at its entrance a pair of inlaid doors set between two marble pillars topped with carved capitals. The outline of a cross can be seen inside the building. The building on the right has a pair of pulled back curtains set between two pillars with a sanctuary lamp or *ner tamid* hanging in between (**Fig. 125)**. I suggest that the building with the inlaid doors was intended to represent the basilica style of church building favoured by the gentile Christians. In contrast, the building with the curtains and *ner tamid* represents the Jewish temple. The identity of the figure standing in front of the temple is usually interpreted as Joseph being informed of Mary's miraculous pregnancy by the angel. The disturbed tessellation around the figure suggests that it has been restored. Indeed, Spain maintains that the figure was originally an older white haired man whom she identifies as Abraham.[387] While I agree that originally the figure may have been older and white haired, I suggest that, rather than Abraham, he was intended to symbolise Peter being told by the angel to turn away from his roots

[385] See for example the fresco of Veneranda and Petronilla in **Fig. 76**. Alongside Petronilla is a capsa full of scrolls depicted in a similar style to the mosaic 'basket of wool'. Scrolls and capsae signified learning and in a Christian context the teachings of the church. Salvadori, S.M., (2002) *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome,* 489, 492.
[386] This early in the development of standardised iconography for the narrative scenes from the New Testament the descending dove was more commonly linked with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Examples of this can be found in catacomb frescoes. I suggest the dove was a later addition.
[387] Spain identifies this figure as Abraham and the seated woman as his wife Sarah. She also claims that the figure is a restoration of the early ninth century so it is hard to know how he may once have looked. Spain S., (1977), 15, n.10; Spain (1979), 538, n.86. For a rebuttal of this see Nordhagen, P.J., (1983) 'The Archaeology of Wall Mosaics: A note on the Mosaics of Sta. Maria Maggiore in Rome'. *AB,* Vol. 65, No. 2, 323-324 and Spain's subsequent response Spain, S., (1983) 'The Restorations of the Sta. Maria Maggiore Mosaics', *AB,* Vol. 65, No.2. 325-328.

within the Jewish Church and instead embrace the Gentile Church. The Peter figure appears again on the opposite side of the triumphal arch in a tableau that is normally interpreted as a representation of the Presentation in the Temple (**Fig. 115**). Here he is clearly portrayed as a white haired bearded man. He stands between the 'woman in gold' who is portrayed holding a miniature figure of Christ and a heavily veiled woman. As a depiction of the Presentation the white haired man is normally identified as the prophet Simeon with the veiled woman as the elderly Anna. The 'woman in gold' is therefore Mary with the young Jesus. Spain re-interpreted the scene as Sarah with the Christ child appearing as a vision to Mary and Joseph at their Betrothal.[388] However, I suggest that the scene is actually a depiction of the meeting between the dynamic and triumphant *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* dressed like a bride and the rejected *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione,* sombrely dressed and heavily veiled in a similar style to her counterpart in the church of Santa Sabina.

Returning once again to the Montagna drawing (**Fig. 124),** I propose that the original mosaic did not feature the miniature figure of Jesus - certainly there is no indication of his presence in this drawing. The white haired bearded man standing between the two churches has his body turned towards *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* and yet he is looking to his right at the approaching figure of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus.* Another group of men are gathered to the right of the tableau behind a crouching white haired bearded figure who has his hands veiled (**Fig. 126**). Stylistically, this crouching figure appears out of place alongside the group of standing figures behind it. There is also evidence of disturbed tessellation and I suggest that it too forms

[388] Spain (1979), 535-537.

part of the later 'Carolingian Restorations' as cited by Spain.[389] The men behind the figure surround a building with the emblem of the goddess Roma on its pediment. On its steps are pairs of turtle doves and pigeons denoting sacrificial offerings made by both Jews and Pagans in the city. I suggest this scene may have been designed to represent the triumph of Christianity over Judaism and paganism in the city as well as confirmation of the Roman Church's dominance across the Christian empire.[390]

Returning to the left hand arch, on the second register we have the unique and controversial scene of the Adoration **(Fig. 114).** This features the enthroned Christ/Logos figure seated between Spain's 'woman in gold' on his right who, I suggest, is actually the triumphant *Ecclesia ex Gentibus*, and the heavily veiled dejected *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* on his left (**Figs. 114 & 114a**). The magi figures are paying tribute to the Christ/Logos as in the early catacomb scenes.

The final appearance of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* is on the second register on the opposite side of the arch. This is in a scene usually interpreted as the flight to Egypt with Mary, Joseph and Jesus meeting Aphrodosius the governor of Sotinen-Hermopolis in Egypt (**Figs. 112, 112a & b**). Returning again to Montagna's drawing of the arch (**Fig. 124**), it is clear that he has portrayed the scene without the figure of the young Jesus, an omission that Spain attributes to poor eyesight and the

[389] Spain S., (1977), 13-22.
[390] The restored mosaic now features a sleeping figure in front of the temple being addressed by an angel; this scene has been read as a dreaming Joseph receiving the warning to flee to Egypt. However Montagna records that he saw an angel addressing a seated figure. Spain suggests that the change to a sleeping figure was made during the eighteenth century restorations and the original meaning of this scene was the Annunciation. Spain (1979), 537-538, n.85

bad state of the mosaics.[391] However, I believe what Montagna saw was indeed accurate. I suggest that, rather than Aphrodosius, the regal looking male figure was actually intended to represent Christ the bridegroom, flanked by John the Baptist arriving in Galilee to meet his new bride *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* (**Figs. 112a – 112b**).[392]

The meaning of the two scenes at the base of the opposite sides of the arch is puzzling. Certainly these parts of the arch have undergone some extensive restoration work over the centuries **(Figs 127 & 112)**.[393] The current interpretation is that the scene on the left represents the Massacre of the Innocents before the enthroned figure of Herod, with a depiction of the city of Jerusalem below **(Fig. 128)**.[394] On the right is said to be the three magi arriving before a similarly enthroned Herod. Beneath this tableau is another cityscape said to represent Bethlehem. Although the enthroned figure has the helpful inscription *Herodes*

[391] Spain, (1979), 519-525. It is clear when looking at Fig 109b that the figure of Christ has been superimposed as he appears to be standing on top of the foot of one of the angels. Montagna has also drawn the figures surrounding the woman as haloed angels. I suggest that one of these angels was later turned into the figure of Joseph. Once again Fig 109b reveals this may have been the case as the original under-drawing has been exposed, showing that the feet of the 'Joseph' figure had originally been in a different position.

[392] The lack of a halo for the Christ figure may indicate the symbolic roles of *Ecclesia* as the bride and Christ as the bridegroom. In the light of this alternative reading of the arch mosaics it is tempting to consider that the design of the original apse mosaic may have inspired its thirteenth century replacement. Commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV the replacement mosaic was executed by Jacopo Torriti and portrays the coronation of the Virgin. It is not inconceivable that the original apse mosaic may have depicted the culmination of the wedding ceremony with Christ crowning his new *Ecclesia*, an imagery that would later be read as the crowning of Mary as queen of heaven. See Nestori and Bisconti, (2000), 15; Spain (1979), 534. See also Krautheimer R., (1942) 'Recent Publications on S. Maria Maggiore in Rome', *AJA*, Vol.46, No.3, 373-379. It has also been suggested that the apse of the fifth century church in Santa Maria Capua Vetere in Campania had a similar mosaic programme. Cormack, R., (2000) 'The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) *Mother of God, Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine*, 92.

[393] See Brenk, Chapters One and Two; Spain (1983), 325-328. Figs. 124 & 125 show how the mosaics look now.

[394] This part of the mosaic was repaired in fresco at some point before the seventeenth century. Spain, (1983) 327.

added above his head, I suggest that the addition of a halo makes this identification extremely unlikely **(Fig 129)**.[395]

The only other figures on the arch that are haloed are the angels and the enthroned Christ figure. It is therefore inconceivable to imagine that the mosaicists would have provided Herod with a similar symbol of divinity. I suggest instead that this enthroned figure was intended to represent God the Father, seated in judgement before the mourning Jewish populace from Jerusalem on the left and the triumphant gentile faithful from Bethlehem on the right. The throne on which he sits seems to confirm this identification. This is an entirely new style of seating unlike the solium or the cathedra we first encountered in Chapter Five. It is a large and impressively crafted piece of furniture with a high square back and a foot rest carved into its base. The whole structure appears to be inlaid with gold, jewels and semi-precious stones and embellished with a large bolster cushion on the seat.[396]

In conclusion I suggest that when the mosaic programme was first designed in the fifth century its message would have been very clear. The narrative scenes on the triumphal arch told the story of the marriage between the *Ecclesia Gentibus* and Christ with the apse presenting the ultimate scene of Christ crowning his new bride.[397] However, alongside the triumph of *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* came the

[395] Spain suggests that this inscription, along with that of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, were added during the Carolingian period either in the eighth or ninth centuries. Spain (1977), 16. Montagna did not include the figures of 'Herod' in his drawing. By the seventeenth century the left hand scene had become damaged and the seated figure lost, whereas the city of Bethlehem and Herod and the magi had been repaired in fresco so did not form part of the original mosaic. Spain (1983), 327.
[396] Although it is clear that this part of the arch has been substantially restored, this style of throne appears in two other scenes on the arch. The Adoration and the empty throne above the inscription on the apex of the arch. I return to the symbolism of these thrones in the next chapter.
[397] As with the Wisdom/Logos imagery from the catacombs I suggest that over time this original meaning of the mosaic cycle would have become less obvious. Inevitable deterioration of the mosaics and damage to the structure of the church may have made the scenes harder to read, leading

humiliation of *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione.* Her rejection conveyed a very powerful message about the primacy of Roman Church and the growing spectre of anti-Judaism. Christ had taken the gentile Church as his bride and in the process rejected the Jewish Church and all that she represented.[398] Unfortunately his mother Mary, despite the triumph of the Council of Ephesus and her role as *Theotokos*, was still Jewish.

As Margaret Miles points out:

> *Honoring the Virgin as the Mother of God created a potential embarrassment:*
> *If Christ received his specific humanity and particular flesh from his mother, Christ could not be thought of as racially neuter, but explicitly Jewish.*[399]

The Roman Church had been struggling with this concept since Augustine himself had announced:

> *The Church admits and avows the Jewish people to be cursed…*[400]

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to them being given a more straight forward narrative interpretation. When the first serious restoration work was undertaken during the eighth or ninth centuries the mosaicists may have made stylistic changes in order to bring the scenes more in line with the current perception of the iconography. Taking this idea one step further, it is tempting to suggest that if the apse had indeed featured a portrayal of Christ crowning his bride *Ecclesia* then this image may have been the inspiration behind the later depictions of Mary being crowned as Queen of Heaven. For a detailed outline of the restoration work from the Carolingian period to the twentieth century see Spain (1983), 325-328.

[398] Miles, M.R., (1993) 'Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews', *HTR*, Vol. 86, 155-175.

[399] Miles, 165.

[400] Augustine, *The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists.* Schaff, P., trans. in *NPNF* 1, Vol. 4
http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf104.iv.ix.xiv.html accessed 31/12/2009.

However, Augustine had also argued theologically that the incarnation of Christ had cancelled out the independent existence of the Jewish people. The Virgin Mary's Jewishness would now also need to be cancelled out in order to make her visually acceptable to the Roman Church. I consider how this metamorphosis was achieved in the next and final Chapter.

Chapter 10

From Virgin to Widow – Mary Re-veiled.

Charting Mary's metamorphosis from Jewish mother to Christian *Theotokos* is the ultimate goal of this chapter and indeed the entire thesis. Before reaching that point I need to return one last time to the mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore and Christ's *Ecclesia* bride.

In the previous chapter I proposed that the woman I identified as *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* was dressed as a bride. Part of the evidence I used for that identification was the outfits worn by Rachel and Zipporah in their wedding scenes featured in the nave mosaics of the church. Developing the bridal link even further, it would also appear that the same style of dress may have been worn by consecrated virgins during the formal *Velatio* ceremony when they too became the brides of Christ. Indeed, there is textual evidence that appears to give weight to this idea via a letter written by Jerome to a highborn virgin named Demetrias.

Penned just a few years before work started on the building of S. Maria Maggiore, the letter describes her consecration as a bride of Christ:

> *I am aware that the bishop has with words of prayer covered her holy head with the virgin's bridal-veil, reciting the while the solemn sentence of the apostle: "I wish to present you all as a chaste virgin to Christ."*[401] *She stood as a queen at his right hand, her clothing of wrought gold and her raiment*

[401] 2 Corinthians 11:2.

of needlework.[402] *Such was the coat of many colours, that is, formed of many different virtues, which Joseph wore; and similar ones were of old the ordinary dress of kings' daughters. Thereupon after receiving the veil the bride herself rejoices and says: "the king hath brought me into his chambers,"*[403] *and the choir of her companions responds*: *"the king's daughter is all glorious within." Thus she is a professed virgin.*[404]

Jerome's flowery language, peppered with Biblical quotes, speaks of 'clothing of wrought gold ….raiment of needlework….coat of many colours' and describes perfectly the robes worn by the 'woman in gold' on the triumphal arch mosaic and several of the other female figures feature in the nave mosaics. Even more telling is the additional description that the clothing was 'of old the ordinary dress of kings' daughters'. Apart from the two brides and Zipporah's bridesmaid, the only other woman in S. Maria Maggiore' nave mosaics dressed in a similar style is the Pharaoh's daughter depicted with the young Moses being presented to her (**Fig 130**). Her elaborately patterned golden outfit with its full white sleeves and heavy jewelled collar is in direct contrast with the other women in the scene who all appear to be dressed in the less ostentatious belted dalmaticus.

We even have a near contemporary set of mosaics depicting portraits of virgin martyrs wearing a similar dress. These can be found in the Archbishop's Chapel built in Ravenna around 494 and decorated with an elaborate mosaic programme featuring medallion portraits of named martyr saints. The saints featured include

[402] Psalms 45. 9, 13, 14.
[403] Song of Solomon, 1, 4.
[404] Wright, F.A., (trans.) (1991) *Jerome Select Letters,* Loeb Classical Library, Letter 130 to Demetrias.

Cecilia, Eugenia, Euphemia, Daria, Perpetua and Felicitas (**Figs. 131 & 132).** With the exception of Felicitas, who I come back to later, the woman are all dressed in a similar elaborate manner that recalls the fashion of the women from S. Maria Maggiore.[405]

Later depictions of martyr saints follow a similar format, suggesting that by the early sixth century the bridal dress had become the formalized iconography of virgin martyrs. This can be seen to best effect in the church of San Apollinare Nuovo, also in Ravenna. The walls of the nave are decorated with a row of 22 processing female martyrs all dressed in a similar style to the *Ecclesia Gentibus*, Rachel and Zipporah figures from the church of S. Maria Maggiore (**Fig. 133**).[406] Across the Adriatic, the magnificent cathedral of S. Eufrasius at Poreč boasts its own collection of martyr brides also dated to the middle of the sixth century (**Fig.134**). The saints are all resplendent in their golden finery with elegant white veils pinned to the back of their heads (**Figs. 135 & 136**).[407]

So why was Felicitas not dressed as a bride when she had endured the same violent end as her fellow martyrs portrayed in both Ravenna and Poreč (**Fig. 137**)?[408] The answer to this puzzle lies with the circumstances of her martyrdom in third century Carthage. The young slave was said to have given birth to a daughter just three

[405] Mackie, G.V., (2003) *Early Christian chapels in the west: decoration, function and patronage*, 104-115

[406] The saints are names as Eufimia, Pelagia, Agatha, Agnes, Eulalia, Cecilia, Lucia, Crispina, Valeria, Vicentia, Perpetua, Felicitas, Justina, Anastasia, Daria, Emerentiana, Paulina, Victoria, Anatolia, Cristina, Sabina, Eugenia. ; C. Ricci, *Monumenti: Tavole storiche dei mosaici di Ravenna* (Rome: Instituo poligrafico dello stato, 1930–1937), 4:67 and 4:71.

[407] A recent study of the mosaics suggests that there was a close link between the mosaic workshops of Ravenna and Poreč during the mid sixth century. Terry, A., & Maguire, H., (2007) *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*, 59-69.

[408] It has been suggested that the two martyrs are dressed this way in order to emphasise their different class: Felicitas was reputed to have been Perpetua's slave. Ronsse, E., (2006) 'Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas' *JECS* Vol. 14, No. 3, 283-327.

days before her execution. Following the rules set down in Leviticus 12:2-8 she would have been unclean for at least two weeks after the birth of a girl and 'shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary'. She would in effect be sexually unavailable and I suggest the artist's choice of dress was intended to describe visually this status.[409] Felicitas is depicted wearing a dark tunic with a white border around her neck, her hair is swept into a white cap and her head is tightly encased by a hooded mantle. A small equal armed cross is pinned to the front of her robe.

What is striking about Felicitas' dress is how closely it resembles the sombre robes of the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* figure from the church of S. Sabina **(Fig. 108)** as well as two other women featured in the mosaic decorations of the neighbouring church of S. Apollinare Nuovo. The first figure is the widow from the depiction of the parable of the 'widow's mite' (**Fig. 138**).[410] This story forms part of a series of panels from the life of Christ that adorn the top part of the church's nave. Like the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* she wears the characteristic hooded mantle that fits tightly to the outline of her head revealing the faint outline of a white cap underneath. This style of dress is in direct contrast to the loosely draped head covering worn by the *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* figure from S. Sabina. The second figure dressed in a similar style can be found beneath the miracle panels alongside the procession of the radiant martyr brides; indeed this particular heavily veiled and draped figure is both their ultimate destination and indeed ours. Haloed, sombrely dressed and seated upon a jewelled and cushioned throne, it would be hard to

[409] Leviticus 12:2-8. http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/perpetua/passio_of_perpetua_05.shtml accessed, 2/10/2009.
[410] The *Parable of the widow's mite* is a story present in Mark 12:38-44 and Luke 20:45-47,21:1-4, in which Jesus describes how the donation of two mites made to the Temple by a poor widow was worth more than all the monies contributed by the wealthy Temple goers.

dismiss this figure as anyone other than the Virgin Mary with the young Jesus seated on her lap (**Fig 139**). Yet compared to the glittering virgin martyrs her dress is striking in its simplicity: a dark tunic embellished with gold cuffs and matching clavi bands with red shoes peeping out from the beneath its folds; an all encompassing mantle decorated with a single gold patch wrapped around her shoulders; her hair swept into a white linen cap and her head tightly encased with a hooded veil.

Her pose, with the three magi approaching to pay homage, closely mirrors that of the Wisdom/Logos Adoration scene that adorned the walls of the catacombs three centuries earlier. Mary has absorbed the identity of 'Wisdom the mother of Christ', seated upon the throne of glory. Once a shadowy figure in profile, Wisdom has now turned to face the world to present herself as Mary the mother of God.[411]

On first sight it is a triumphant image: Mary is seated on an elaborately decorated jewel encrusted throne, a new style of furniture that I believe had been designed to signify the divine aspect of Christ. This is a symbolism that first appeared on the apex of the triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore **(Figs 141 & 142**).[412]

[411] The dating of the mosaics of S. Apollinare Nuovo is still the subject of debate. The church was first built by the Ostrogoth king Theodoric in the first quarter of the sixth century. However the original mosaics featuring members of his court may have been replaced by the processing virgins and the two portraits of the enthroned Virgin and enthroned Christ during the reconsecration of the church in 561. Montanari, G., *Mosaics, worship, culture: Religious culture in the mosaics of the basilicas of Ravenna*, 51-65.

[412] There are four different examples of a similar elaborately decorated throne depicted on the triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore. Two are linked to the figure identified as Herod, but who I believe to be God the Father, (**Figs. 125 & 126).** The third is occupied by the young Christ in the Adoration scene **(Fig. 111),** while the empty throne appears on the top of the triumphal arch above the inscription *Xystus episcopus plebi dei* flanked by the figures of Peter and Paul **(Fig 138**). On the cushioned seat is balanced a jewelled cross, crown and purple drape. Placed on the footstool below is a scroll with seven seals. The throne is surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists suggesting that this was intended to represent the empty throne of the second coming as referred to in Revelation 20:11. This style of empty throne became known as an *Etimasia* or *Hetoimasia*. Murray,

However, Mary's sombre dress contrasts dramatically with her heavenly throne and the golden haired angels that stand guard beside her. Why would the mosaicists commissioned to portray Mary as the Mother of God depict her in such an understated way? I believe that the answer to this conundrum can be found back in the underground catacombs of Rome. In the catacomb of Comodilla is an unusually large fresco dated to around 530. It depicts the Virgin and child in a similar pose to the Ravenna mosaic, haloed and seated on a jewel encrusted throne with her son on her lap. The holy couple are flanked by two saints, named as Felix and Adauctus who were also buried in the catacomb (**Fig. 143**). One of the saints has his hand placed on the shoulder of a woman encased in black, standing on the left side of the painting. The inscription at the bottom of the painting tells us that this is an image of the deceased, who appears to be presenting a white veil to the holy couple. It continues with a eulogy from the dead woman's son in which he praises his mother Turtura for remaining celibate for thirty-six years after the death of her husband.[413]

What is striking about both the Roman fresco and the monumental mosaic from Ravenna is how similar Mary's appearance is to both of the S. Sabina *ecclesiae* mosaics created a century earlier. Her hooded mantle is modelled on the dress of the Jewish *Ecclesia ex circumcisione* while like *Ecclesia ex gentibus* she holds a *mappa* in her left hand **(Fig 109).** I suggest that the similarity was no accident. By the time this fresco had been painted Mary's visual identity had been carefully

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P., and L., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, 228; Wilpert, J., (2007) *Roman Mosaics*, Figs 31, 37, 38, 44, 55.

[413] He describes her as like a turtle-dove who has no other love after the death of its mate. Barber, C., (2000) 'Early Representations of the Mother of God' in Vassilaki, M., (ed.) *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art,* 254 -255

crafted in order to control her rapidly developing popularity.[414] Theologically she may have absorbed the role of Theotokos, but visually she assumed the persona of Wisdom and donned the robes of both the Gentile and Jewish *Ecclesiae*. Such a merger neatly cancelled out the difficult issue of her Jewishness, thereby ensuring she could become the acceptable face of the Universal Church.

Having solved the dilemma of her ethnicity and positioned her as a symbol of the Church, Mary could then be promoted as a suitable role model to a variety of factions within the church's hierarchy and the Christian community as a whole. Two centuries earlier Damasus had developed a literary and visual propaganda campaign to promote the primacy of Rome using the *Concordia apostolorum* as his 'brand image'. In the process the bishop created an entirely fictitious friendship between St. Peter and St. Paul using art to portray a brotherly bond.[415] I suggest that a similar branding exercise was developed by church leaders in the sixth century with Mary's appearance becoming a carefully constructed propaganda exercise.

The hooded mantle or *maphorion* adopted from the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* figure, the common garb for female ascetics from the east, was deliberately chosen to represent her sexual unavailability.[416] Dressed in this way Mary could be perceived as a role model for celibate Christian women everywhere, be they wealthy

[414] There is still considerable debate as to how quickly the cult of Mary developed following the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. For the latest discussions on the subject see Maunder, C., (ed.) (2008) *The Origin of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*.
[415] See Huskinson, J., (1982) *Concordia Apostolorum: Christian Propaganda at Rome in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: a study of Early Christian Iconography and Iconology.*
[416] This style of dress favoured was favoured by ascetic women from Egypt and the eastern reaches of the Empire. Although the term maphorion is usually described as a veil it is more likely to have been a mantle with a hood favoured by widows and consecrated virgins. Documents found in the house of a fourth century Egyptian tailor list their regular orders from the nearby ascetic community. The most popular items are cowls, cloaks and maphorion. Gardner, I.A., Alcock, A., Funk, W.P., (1999) *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis*: v. 1 46.6; Murray, P & L., (1996) *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, 304.

and powerful widows or dutiful and subservient virgins.[417] Her additional attribute of the highly symbolic *mappa* increased her influence over another powerful group of women within the church – the deaconesses.[418]

Although superficially the *mappa* appears to be nothing more than an over-large handkerchief, to a Roman audience its ancient symbolism and the authority it bestowed on its owner would be very clear. It is said to have started off life as the dining napkin of the Roman emperor Nero. As the Roman crowds restlessly awaited the start of the games the emperor would rise from his banquet and toss down his napkin thereby heralding the commencement of the entertainment. When the organization of the games was taken over by the emperor's consuls the *mappa* became their symbol of authority as designated representatives of the emperor.[419] As the church developed its more formalised hierarchy it also started to absorb some

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[417] It has already become a habit for celibate women to give away their fine clothes and jewels and wear dark and sombre clothes. Jerome describes how one young wealthy virgin:

> *took her gold necklace made in the lamprey style…and without the knowledge of her parents, sold it. Then putting on the kind of sombre dress her mother had never wanted her to wear she concluded her pious undertaking by consecrating herself henceforth to the Lord.* (Jerome Let. 24.3)

Jerome *Select Letters*, Wright, F.A., trans. (1991). Although we have little direct evidence it seems possible that the second part of the *Velatio* ceremony involved the consecrated virgins exchanging their bridal wear for what Jerome refers to as 'sombre dress'. Marcellina the sister of Ambrose was presented with a veil of 'sombre colour' during her veiling ceremony in 352. Wright, F.A., trans. (1991) *Jerome Select Letters* - Loeb Classical Library, 485. Jerome refers to the plain dark clothes of consecrated virgins several times in his *Selected Letters.*

[418] Although the earliest reference to a female deacon comes from New Testament, Romans 16:1 where Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, the more formalised role of deaconess may have been instigated by local bishops in the eastern part of the empire as a way of controlling the growing power of the 'order of widows' who had been teaching and baptising. However, over time the deaconess' power within the church reduced dramatically so that by the sixth century her role had been limited to little more than looking after female baptismal candidates. The history of the deaconess is explored in more details in the following publications: Kraemer, R.S., (1992) *Her Share of the Blessings*, 181-183; Thurston, A.B., (1989) *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church;* Cloke, G., (1995) *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350-450* ; Methuen, C., (1995) 'Widows, Bishops and the Struggle for Authority in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*', *JEH* 46 197-213; Methuen, C., (1997) 'The 'Virgin Widow': A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?' *HTR* 90:3, 285-298; Thurston, A.B., (1989) *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church.*

[419] McClanan, A., (2002) *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses*, 71; St. Clair, A., (1966) 'Imperial Virtue: Questions of Form and Function in the Case of Four Late Antique Statuettes' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 50, 147-162.53-154; Brown, P., (1981) *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 47.

of the traditions of imperial regalia. As early as the fourth century Sylvester the Bishop of Rome chose to incorporate the *mappa* into the design of the clerical vestments. He ordered that the left hand of deacons should be covered with a cloth of linen warp. This cloth was first hung over the wrist, then carried between the first finger and thumb as well as being tucked into the girdle.[420] In the same way that the Bishop regarded himself on a par with the emperor, the deacon was seen as the consul, the second in command: the *mappa* symbolised this role.

What is especially striking about Mary's adoption of the Roman *mappa* is that deaconesses were more common in the Eastern Church. In the west church leaders were far more reluctant to allow women a role within the church hierarchy. Indeed by the sixth century, church councils were actively trying to suppress deaconesses.[421]

Although Mary may have been depicted holding the regalia of a deaconess, like that of her earthly counterparts, her power within the western Church was being carefully controlled. Enthroned and now taking centre stage in the decorative schemes of basilicas and cathedrals around the western empire, it would be easy to assume that Mary had become deaconess to her own son Jesus - a role that should have brought with it the power to intercede between God and humanity. However, both her sombre dress and distant gaze tell a different story as to her real status within the emergent Church. In each depiction she is flanked by male figures, either angels or saints **(Figs 140 & 143**). It is her saintly bodyguard who take on the role

[420] Norris, H., (2002) *Church Vestments Their Origin and Development*, (re-print from the 1950 edition), 92.
[421] Madigan, K., & Osiek, C., (eds.) (2005) *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, 141-149.

of intercessors between God and mankind; she is merely a conduit between heaven and the saints.

Mary may have finally emerged from the shadows to turn to face the world. She may have taken her place on the jewel encrusted throne of heaven. She may even have donned the robes of the most powerful female factions within Christianity, but as the sixth century draws to a close her role in the western Church is still evolving. For the moment she remains powerless, little more than an artistic embodiment of a male ideal, her cult still awaiting its first flowerings.

Conclusion

I started work on this thesis by asking myself what I thought was a simple question - 'What can art tell us about the cult of the Virgin Mary in the early Roman Church?' I had no preconceived ideas as to what the answer would be and I approached my research with no religious agenda.[422]

I believed, perhaps naively, that I had selected a fairly straight forward project involving religious art in late antiquity – I could not have been more wrong. My search for the earliest examples of Marian images was a roller coaster ride. First I found myself plunged into the darkest recesses of the catacombs where I stumbled across some of the vicious conflicts that had once threatened the very foundations of the early church communities of Rome. From there I was confronted by the reality of the manipulation and control of women by male Church leaders alongside the ever present spectre of anti-Judaism. Whilst studying the evidence of the rediscovery of the catacombs during the Counter- Reformation period I found myself wrestling with the religious agendas of both scholars and the explorers who disseminated the information they uncovered. I then discovered to what extent these agendas continued to effect the scholarship and archaeology of the early Church right up until the last century and to some degree beyond.

Throughout this long and complex artistic journey I studied the minutiae of ancient furniture, the importance of which would have previously passed me by. I looked with fresh eyes at the elaborate costumes of virgins, saints, brides, widows and even

[422] I was baptised in the Church of England and educated in a Roman Catholic convent school. Having dabbled with neo paganism throughout the 1970s and 80s I now regard myself as a freethinker.

empresses who graced the walls of the earliest churches of the west. I found a glimmer of the real lives of ordinary Romans in the remnants of their golden bowls and saw flashes of love and heartbreak in their family funerary portraits in the catacombs. On a personal level I found myself forced to revisit and reconsider my own ideas of the 'goddess movement' that played such a vital role in the development of feminist spirituality throughout the twentieth century.

I was often surprised, sometimes disappointed and occasionally shocked with what I uncovered throughout my journey, but I continued to work my way through the early centuries convinced I would find my goal. Yet so many times when I thought I had finally found the face of Mary, she would fade away only to be replaced by unsubstantial images of allegory and personification, the real woman still eluding my grasp. Her title of 'Virgin' and 'Mother' and sometimes even the Latinised version of her name Maria would appear in the writings of powerful Church Fathers, most often as a way of emphasising both the divinity and humanity of her son and yet her face remained in shadow.

As I researched the fifth century and the era of the great Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, the moment when Mary was elevated to the role of *Theotokos* I became convinced that I would find her finally taking her place in the giant billboard of the basilica apse. It was here that I believed her image would be celebrated in a riot of gold mosaic tesserae, an image to rival that of the empress herself.

Once again I was disappointed: nowhere could I find solid evidence that such an image had ever been created. Even though one of the oldest churches in Rome was

said to have been built in her honour, I failed to find clear evidence that her image ever existed on the triumphal arch of St. Maria Maggiore. Then as the sixth century dawned in Rome and throughout the western empire so it seemed did Mary, but certainly not in the way I had expected.

The Mary who finally made her appearance immortalised in mosaic, painted as frescoes and carved on ivory panels, was not the triumphant Mother of God I had hoped to find. Swathed in metres of dark cloth, her face framed with the tight fitting maphorion of the eastern ascetic, hemmed in by a body guard of saints and angels, this was a woman without real independence or power. Covered from head to toe with all her sexuality suppressed, Mary's iconography had been designed to create a role model for any woman who may have considered it their right to claim an influential place in the increasingly patriarchal Roman Church.

With the sixth century I had reached the natural end of the Late Antique period. My re-evaluation of the evidence for Marian images in the previous centuries complete, I was finally able to answer my original question – Art had indeed much to tell about the cult of the Virgin Mary in the early Roman Church.

Appendix 1

The Refutation of All Heresies Book IX Chapter VII. V. 131

> *The impostor Callistus, having ventured on such opinions, established a school of theology in antagonism to the Church, adopting the foregoing system of instruction. And he first invented the device of conniving with men in regard of their indulgence in sensual pleasures, saying that all had their sins forgiven by himself. For he who is in the habit of attending the congregation of any one else, and is called a Christian, should he commit any transgression; the sin, they say, is not reckoned unto him, provided only he hurries off and attaches himself to the school of Callistus. And many persons were gratified with his regulation, as being stricken in conscience, and at the same time having been rejected by numerous sects; while also some of them, in accordance with our condemnatory sentence, had been by us forcibly ejected from the Church. Now such disciples as these passed over to these followers of Callistus, and served to crowd his school. This one propounded the opinion, that, if a bishop was guilty of any sin, if even a sin unto death he ought not to be deposed. About the time of this man, bishops, priests, and deacons, who had been twice married, and thrice married, began to be allowed to retain their place among the clergy. If also, however, any one who is in holy orders should become married, Callistus permitted such a one to continue in holy orders as if he had not sinned. And in justification, he alleges that what has been spoken by the Apostle has been declared in reference to this person: "Who art thou that judgest another*

man's servant?" But he asserted that likewise the parable of the tares is uttered in reference to this one: "Let the tares grow along with the wheat;" or, in other words, let those who in the Church are guilty of sin remain in it. But also he affirmed that the ark of Noe was made for a symbol of the Church, in which were both dogs, and wolves, and ravens, and all things clean and unclean; and so he alleges that the case should stand in like manner with the Church. And as many parts of Scripture bearing on this view of the subject as he could collect, he so interpreted.

And the hearers of Callistus being delighted with his tenets, continue with him, thus mocking both themselves as well as many others, and crowds of these dupes stream together into his school. Wherefore also his pupils are multiplied, and they plume themselves upon the crowds (attending the school) for the sake of pleasures which Christ did not permit. But in contempt of Him, they place restraint on the commission of no sin, alleging that they pardon those who acquiesce (in Callistus' opinions). For even also he permitted females, if they were unwedded, and burned with passion at an age at all events unbecoming, or if they were not disposed to overturn their own dignity through a legal marriage, that they might have whomsoever they would choose as a bedfellow, whether a slave or free, and that a woman, though not legally married, might consider such a companion as a husband. Whence women, reputed believers, began to resort to drugs for producing sterility, and to gird themselves round, so to expel what was being conceived on account of their not wishing to have a child either by a slave or by any paltry fellow, for the sake of their family and excessive wealth Behold, into how great impiety that lawless one has proceeded, by

inculcating adultery and murder at the same time! And withal, after such audacious acts, they, lost to all shame, attempt to call themselves a Catholic Church! And some, under the supposition that they will attain prosperity, concur with them. During the episcopate of this one, second baptism was for the first time presumptuously attempted by them. These, then, (are the practices and opinions which) that most astonishing Callistus established, whose school continues, preserving its customs and tradition, not discerning with whom they ought to communicate, but indiscriminately offering communion to all. And from him they have derived the denomination of their cognomen; so that, on account of Callistus being a foremost champion of such practices, they should be called Callistians. [423]

[423] Schaff, P., *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian*, 130.http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iii.vii.viii.html accessed 1/6/2008

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Art Bulletin
AIRN	Acta Institutum Romanum Norvegiae
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
AJP	American Journal of Philology
Anal. Boll.	Analecta Bollandiana
ANF	The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Fathers Down to AD 325. Schaff, P., ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 (Source: Logos Research Systems: www.ccel.org)
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
CA	Cahiers archéologiques
CH	Church History
CP	Classical Philology

CQ	Classical Quarterly
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
HTR	The Harvard Theological Review
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JEH	Journal of Ecclesiastical History
JFSR	Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JHS	Journal of Hellenic Studies
JMEMS	Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies
JMH	Journal of Modern History
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
JWCI	Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes

NPNF 1	The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, first series. Schaff, P., ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 (Source: Logos Research Systems: www.ccel.org)
NPNF 2	The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, first series. Schaff, P., ed. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001 (Source: Logos Research Systems: www.ccel.org)
PBSR	Papers of the British School at Rome
PCAS	Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra
PIAC	Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana
RAC	Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana
RHE	Revue d'Historie Ecclésiastique
SJRS	Scottish Journal of Religious Studies
VigC	Vigiliae Christianae

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Illustrations

All images are from Rome unless stated otherwise.

Chapter One

Fig. 1. Fresco of a 'Good Shepherd' misinterpreted as a representation of 'St Priscilla at Work' by one of Alfonso Chacon's copyists. Pen and ink sketch from the Catacomb of Priscilla described by Chacon as 'St Priscilla feeding the preachers of the gospel, represented as cocks and the faithful as sheep' (Wilpert, G., *Die Katakombengemalde und ihre alten Copien*)

Fig. 2.
Above, black and white photograph of a painting in the catacomb in the cemetery of Novella depicting Noah emerging from the Ark in the pose of an orante.
Below, a late 16th century copy of the painting misinterpreted by Chacon as a representation of St. Marcellus preaching.
(Wilpert, G., *Die Katakombengemalde und ihre alten Copien*)

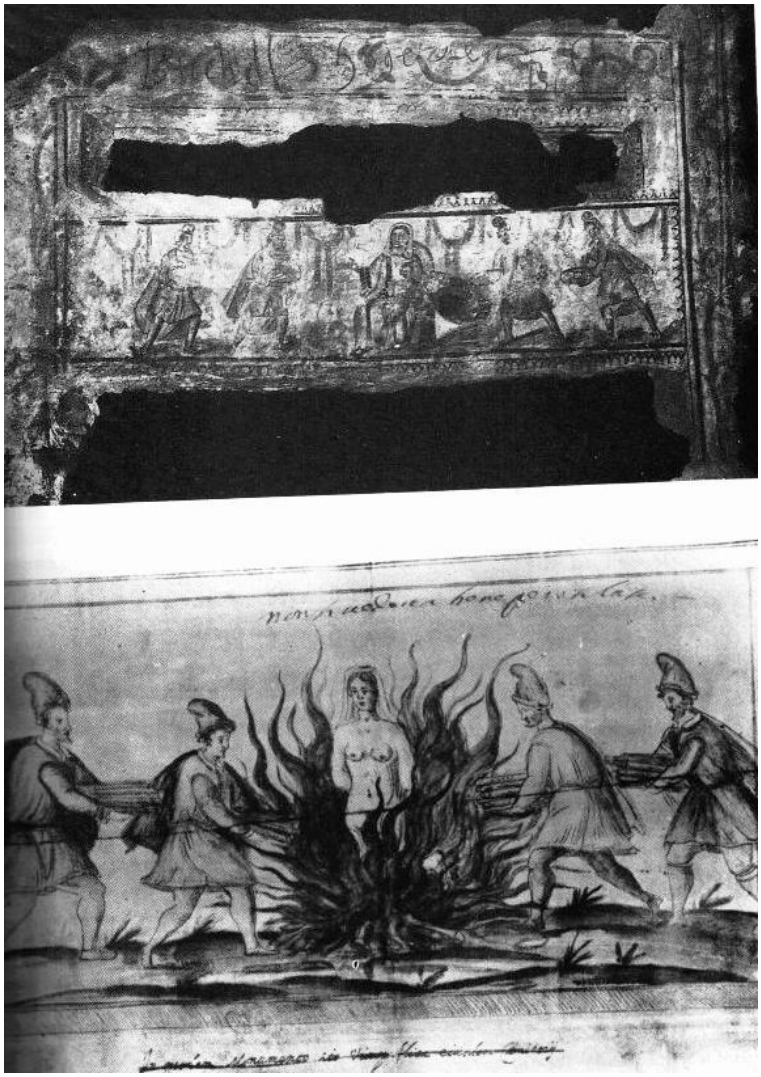

Fig. 3.
Above, black and white photograph of a painting around a loculus in the catacomb of Domitilla depicting the adoration with four Magi.
Below, late 16th century copy of the painting, re-interpreted as a naked female martyr being burnt at the stake with the four male figures adding faggots to the fire. (Wilpert, G., *Die Katakombengemalde und ihre alten Copien*).

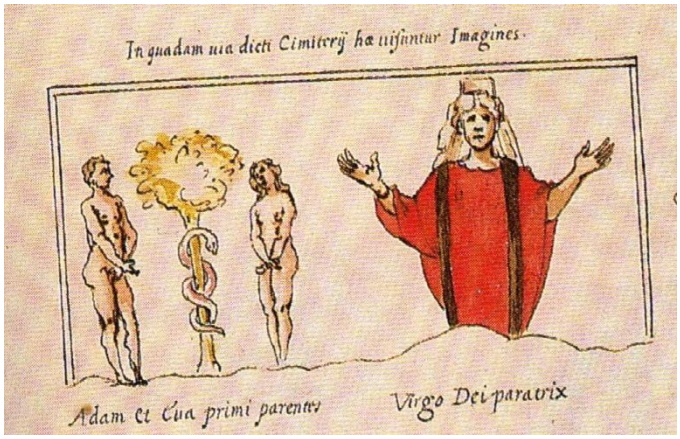

Fig. 4. Coloured sketch of a painting of an orante (praying figure) from the Catacomb of Domitilla. The 17th century copyist has identified the figure as *Virgo Dei paratrix*. (*The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* Vol. 2).

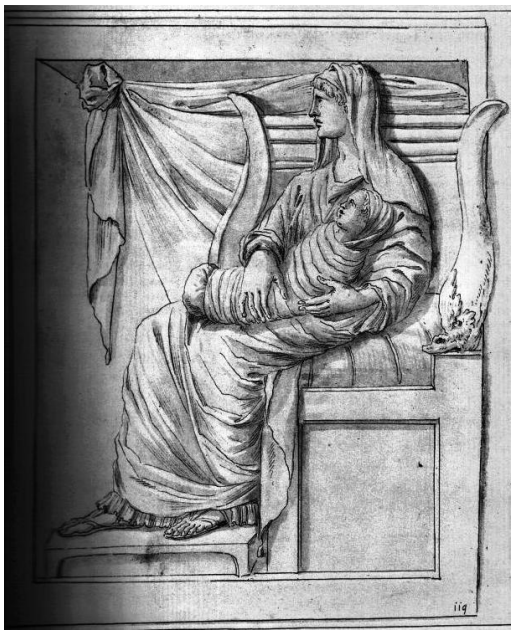

Fig. 5. Pen and ink drawing of a seated woman and child from a Roman sarcophagus relief carving. The sketch has been attributed to Pietro Testa (1612-50) and the scene has been described as an image of the 'Madonna and Child'.
(*Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* Vol. 2).

Fig. 6. Pen and ink drawing of a Roman sarcophagus relief carving. The drawing has been attributed to Pietro Testa (1612-50). The scene featured in the drawing has been described by the artist as a representation of the 'Madonna and Child with Shepherds'. (*Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* Vol. 2).

Fig. 7. Sketch of a sarcophagus relief identified as 'The Adoration of The Magi' attributed to Pietro Testa (1612-50).
(*Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo* Vol. 2).

Chapter Two

Fig. 8. Catacomb of Priscilla from the cubiculum of the 'Velatio'. Back wall detail featuring seated woman and child.
(*Catacomb of Priscilla Guidebook,* PCAS 2005).

Fig. 9. The complete fresco from the back wall of the cubiculum of the 'Velatio' in the catacomb of Priscilla. (*Catacomb of Priscilla Guidebook*, PCAS 2005).

Fig. 10. Sarcophagus of M. Cornelius Statius. Ostia, Hadrianic period. The relief carvings show scenes from the life of the dead child. (Louvre Museum, Paris).

Fig 11. A lunette from above an arcosolium in the Coemeterium Maius Cemetery. Fresco of veiled woman in the pose of an orante with a young boy. The figures are flanked by two Chi Rho monograms, one in a reversed position. (© Foto PCAS).

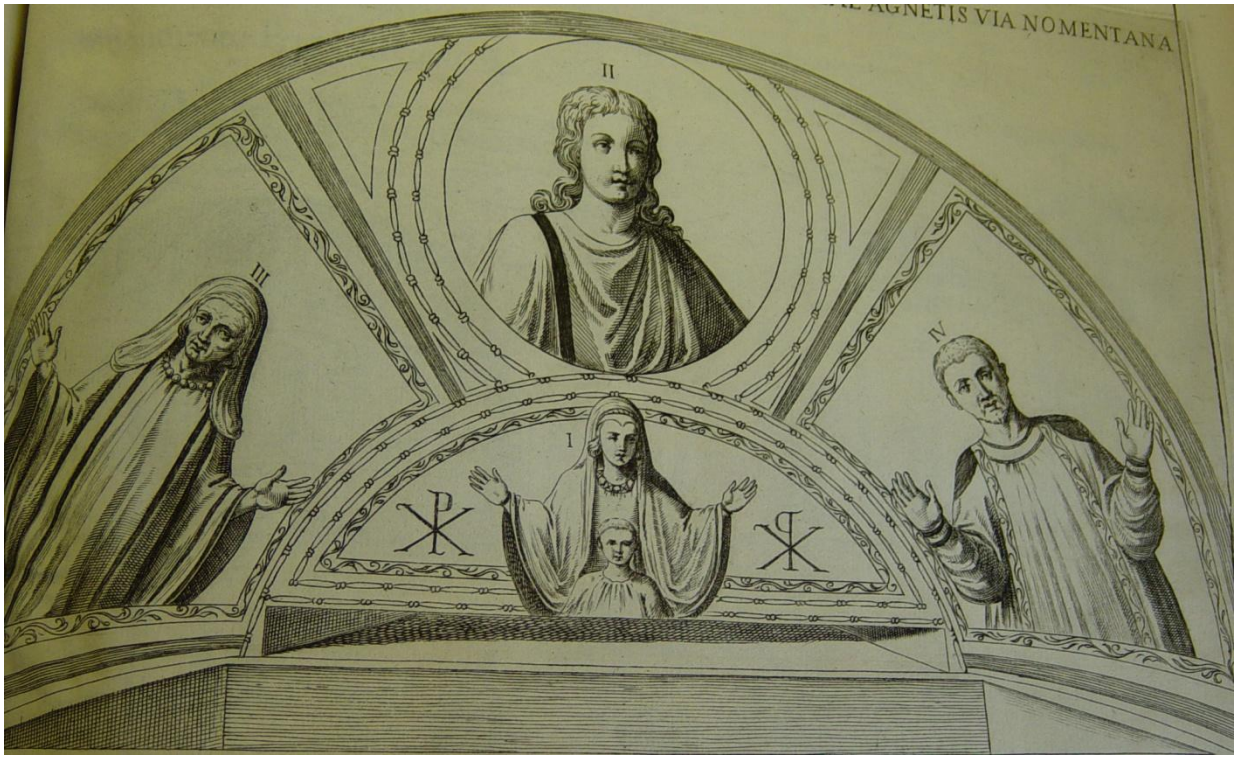

Fig. 12. Antonio Bosio's drawing of the Coemeterium Maius Cemetery arcosolium paintings. The drawing also features details of the other frescoes decoration the burial chamber. (Bosio, A., (1632) *Roma Sotterranea*).

Figs. 13 & 14. Black and white photographs of the two painted orantes on the side walls of the arcosolium from the Coemeterium Maius Cemetery. (Grabar, A., (1980) *Christian Iconography: a study of its origins*).

Fig. 15. Marble funerary relief of a mother and son c.110-20 AD.
The inscription reads “Petronia Hedone set this up for herself, for her son Lucius Petronius Philemon, and for her freedmen and freedwomen and their descendants.”
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Credits: Barbara McManus, 2003.

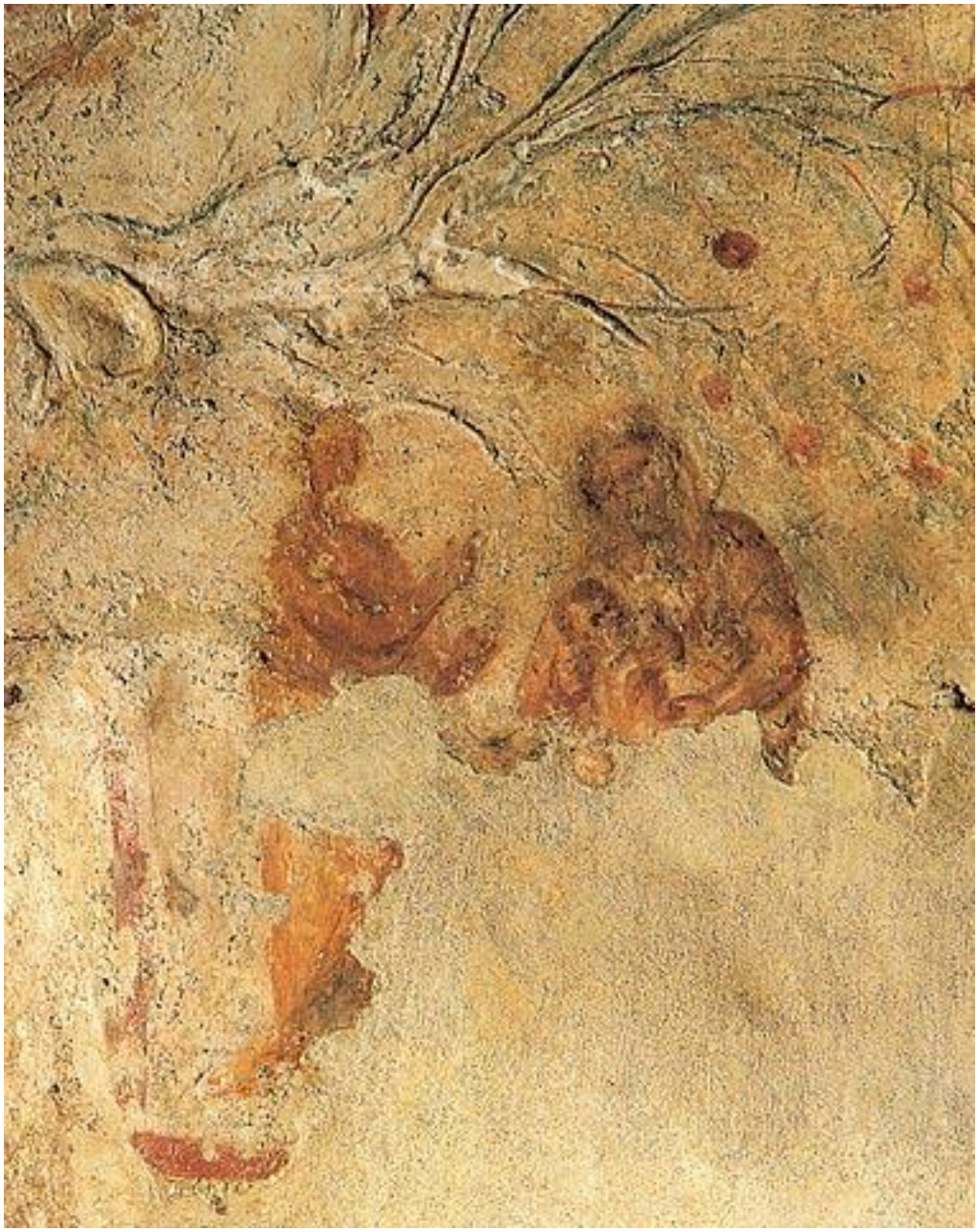

Fig. 16. Detail from wall painting featuring seated woman and child and standing pointing figure from Catacomb of Priscilla. Dated to the third century and said to represent the Virgin and Child with Balaam or Isaiah pointing to a star above their heads. (© Foto PCAS)

© Paavo Pirttimaa
Sketch of the earliest of image of Mary
from the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome
by Paavo Pirttimaa

Fig. 17. Artist's impression of Fig.16 used as the logo of the International Mariology Project. (© Parvo Pirttimaa)

Fig. 18. Stucco and fresco tomb decoration from Catacomb of Priscilla featuring 'Good Shepherd' figure between two sheep with standing pointing figure and seated woman and child painted at an angle to the right. (© Foto PCAS).

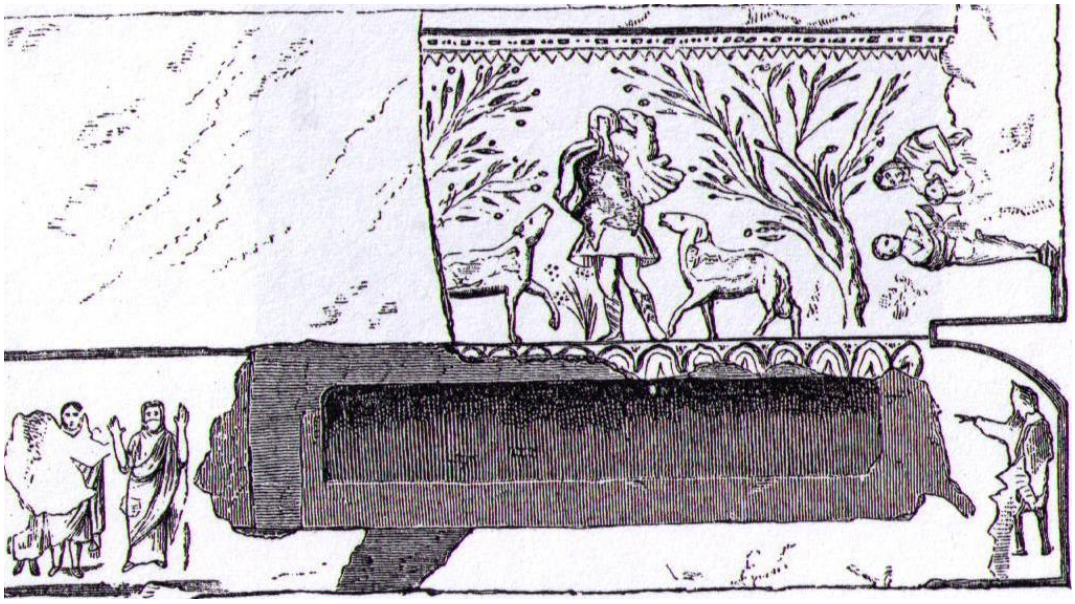

Fig. 19. Drawing of stucco and fresco tomb decoration from Catacomb of Priscilla. (Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma sotterranea*).

Fig. 20. Antonio Bosio's sketch of the figures from the tomb decoration in the Catacomb of Priscilla (Wilpert, J., *Die Malereinen der katakomben Roms*).

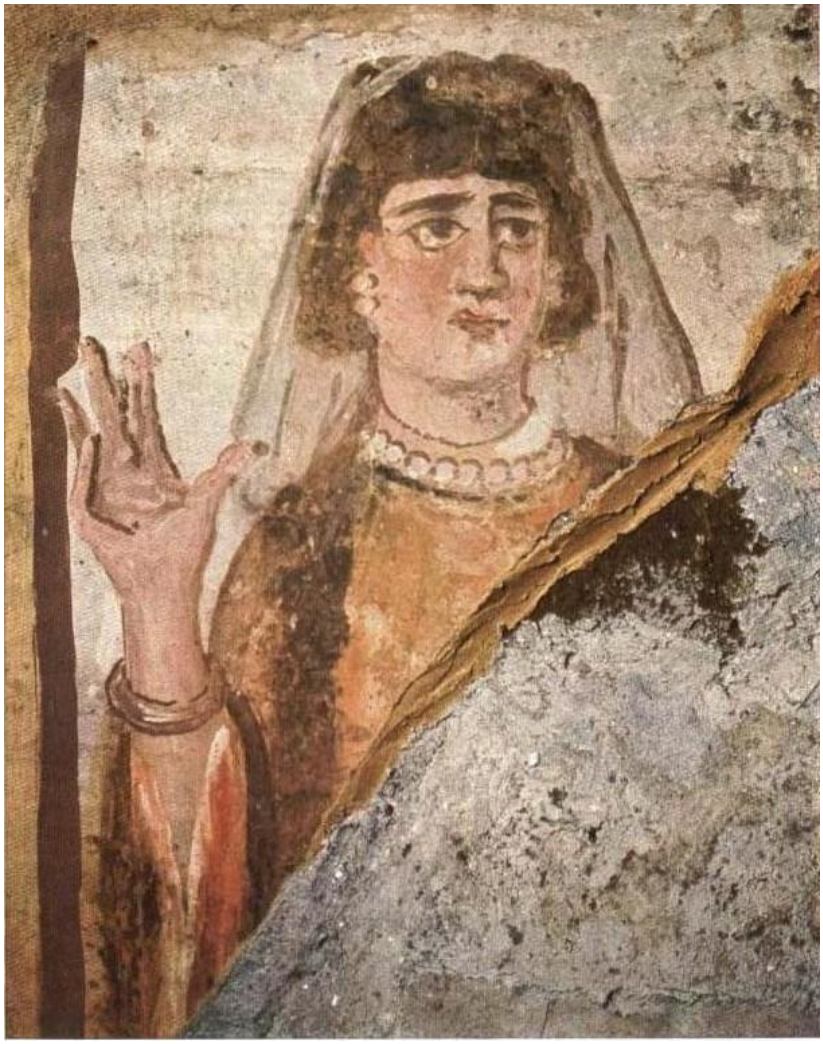

Fig. 21. Fresco of veiled orante woman from Catacomb of Vigna Massimo. (Wilpert, J., *Die Malereinen der katakomben Roms*).

Fig. 22. Engraving of detail of tomb fresco featuring seated woman and child and pointing figure from Catacomb of Priscilla. (Northcote, J.S., Brownlow, W.R. *Roma sotterranea* Vol. 2).

Fig. 23. Catacomb of Priscilla: Stucco figure of Good Shepherd and sheep and fresco of woman and child and pointing figure. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photography by Pompeo and Renato Sansaini, 1897-1903. Commissioned by Joseph Wilpert and reproduced in *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*.

Fig. 24. Catacomb of Priscilla: Fresco of woman and child and pointing figure. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photography by Pompeo and Renato Sansaini, 1897-1903. Commissioned by Joseph Wilpert and reproduced in *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*.

Fig. 25. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) *Virgin of the Adoption*, oil on canvas, 1858. Private Collection.

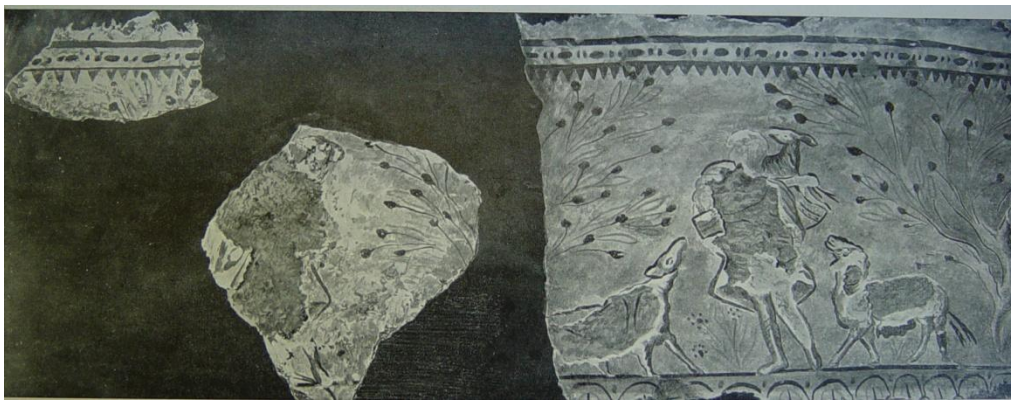

Fig. 26. Photograph of restoration work undertaken on the stucco shepherd from the tomb decoration in Catacomb of Priscilla.
(Wilpert, J., *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*).

Chapter Three

Fig 27. Ceiling fresco with central motif of seated woman being addressed by standing male figure from the Cubicle of Annunciation in the Catacomb of Priscilla. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 28. Antonio Bosio's drawing of ceiling fresco in the Cubicle of Annunciation from the Catacomb of Priscilla. (Bosio, A., (1632) *Roma Sotterranea*).

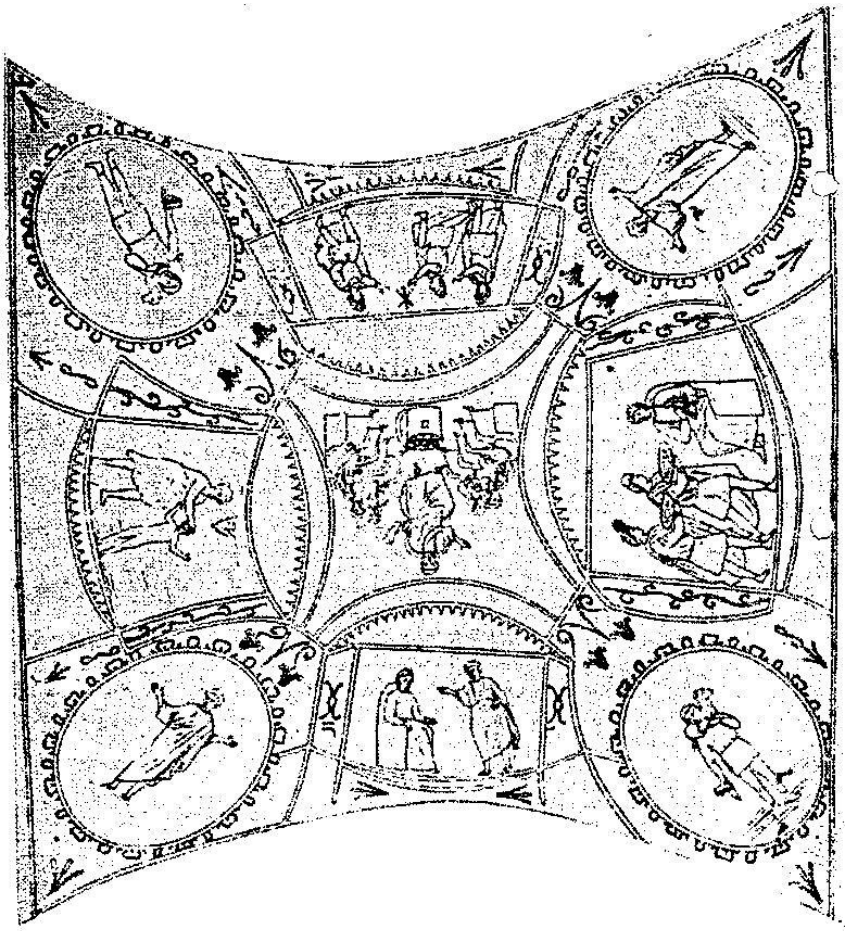

Fig. 29. Drawing of ceiling fresco from the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus. (Wilpert, J., (1891) *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakombe der heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus*).

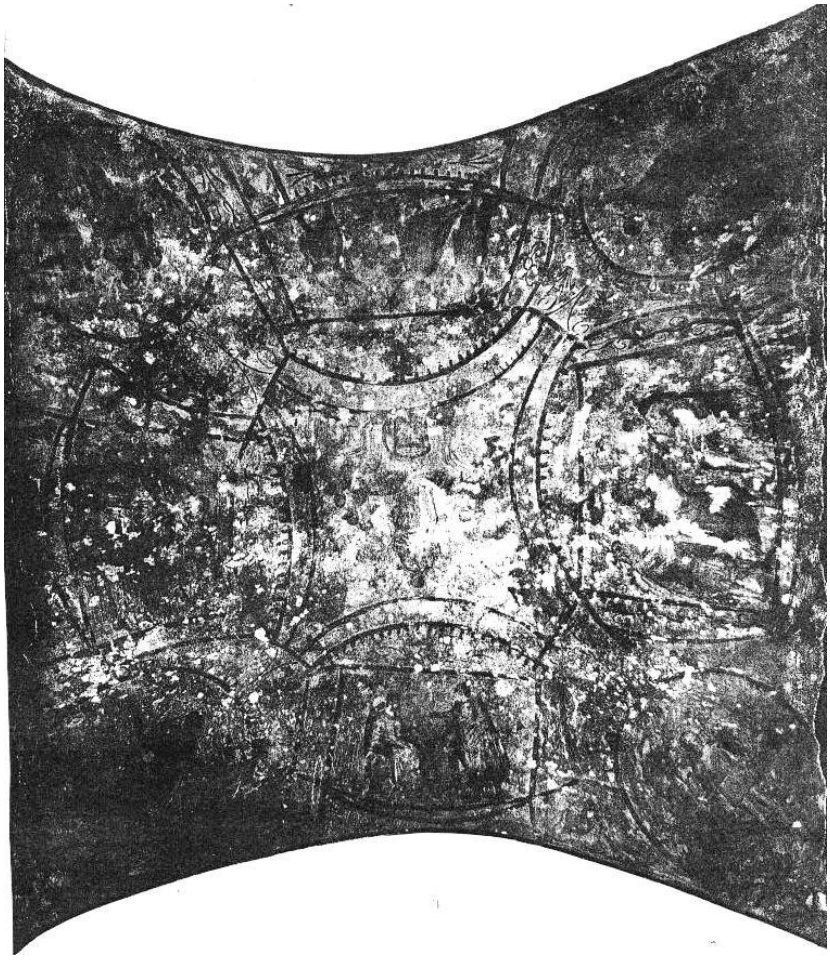

Fig. 30. Black and white photograph of ceiling fresco from the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus taken for Joseph Wilpert.
(Wilpert, J., (1891) *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakombe der heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus*).

Fig. 31. Silver flagon with repoussé decoration of biblical scenes featuring ‘Adoration of the Magi’. Part of the Traprain Law Hoard. (National Museums Scotland).

Fig. 32. Silver flagon with repoussé decoration of biblical scenes featuring the ‘Miracle of the Quails’. Part of the Traprain Law Hoard. (National Museums Scotland).

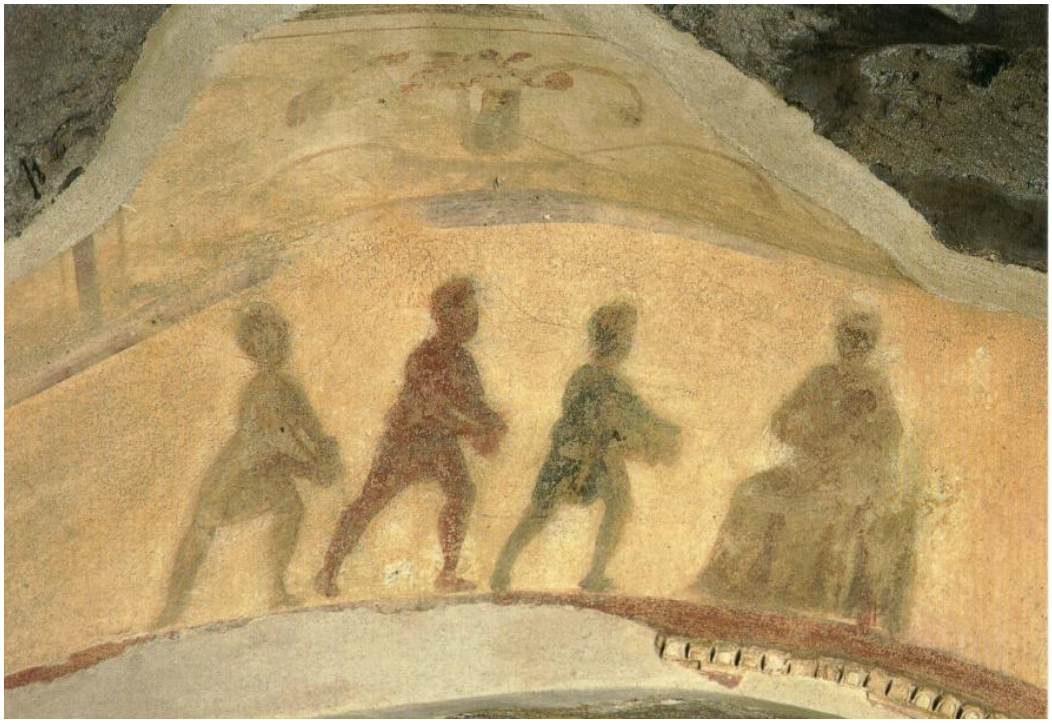

Fig. 33. Fresco on an archway of the Greek Chapel in the Catacomb of Priscilla identified as the 'Adoration of the Magi'. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig 34. 'Adoration of Magi' fresco from Catacomb of Domitilla featuring four magi. (© Foto PCAS).

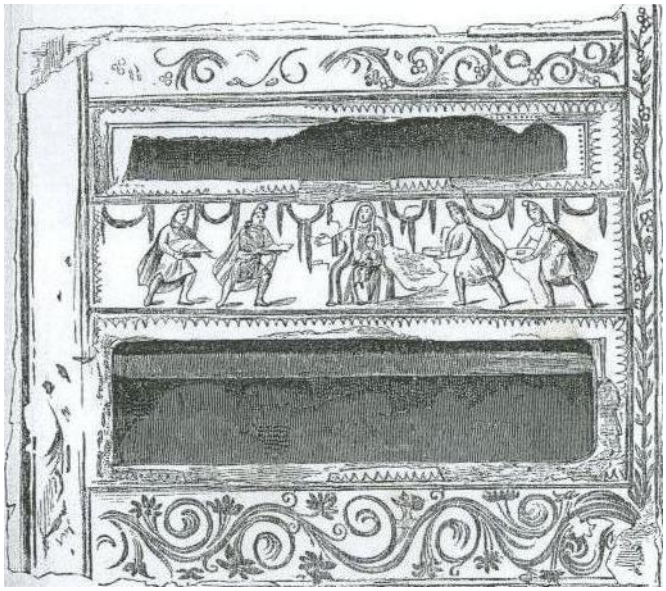

Fig. 35. Drawing of the 'Adoration of the Magi' fresco from the Catacomb of Domitilla. (Northcote, J.S., and Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma Sotterranea*).

Fig. 36. Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter with frescoes from the 'Crypt of the Virgin' featuring an 'Adoration of the Magi' scene. Watercolours by Carlo Tabanelli over photographs by Pompeo and Renato Sansaini, 1897-1903. (Spier, J., (ed.) (2008) *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*).

Fig. 37. Detail of mother and child from the ‘Adoration of Magi’ fresco from Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 38. Detail of marble relief carving of Parthian prisoner from Triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus.

Fig. 39. Fragment of sarcophagus featuring ‘Adoration of the Magi’ with details of donation from the deceased inscribed on one of the Magi’s gifts.
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Fig. 40. Fragment of sarcophagus featuring ‘Adoration of the Magi’ with figure of deceased following behind the Magi procession. (Museo delle Terme).

Fig. 41. Sarcophagus of a child featuring scene of ‘Adoration of the Magi’. with child’s features transposed onto that of the Christ figure. (Pio Christian Museum).

Fig. 42. Sarcophagi fragments of Adoration and Nativity scenes.
(Pio Christian Museum).

Fig. 43. Reconstructed statue of St. Hippolytus (side view).
(Vatican Museum).

Fig. 44. Reconstructed statue of St Hippolytus (front view).
(Vatican Museum).

Plate 6. Unreconstructed Statue: Naples *ms* XIII. B.7 p. 424

Fig. 45. Drawing of unreconstructed statue from Pirro Ligorio's notes. (National Library of Naples).

Plate 12. Drawing in Fulvius Ursinus *ms.* 3439

Fig. 46. Drawing of unreconstructed statue from manuscript of Fulvius Orsinus (1564 -1570). (Brent, A., (1995) *Hippolytus and the Roman church in the third century*).

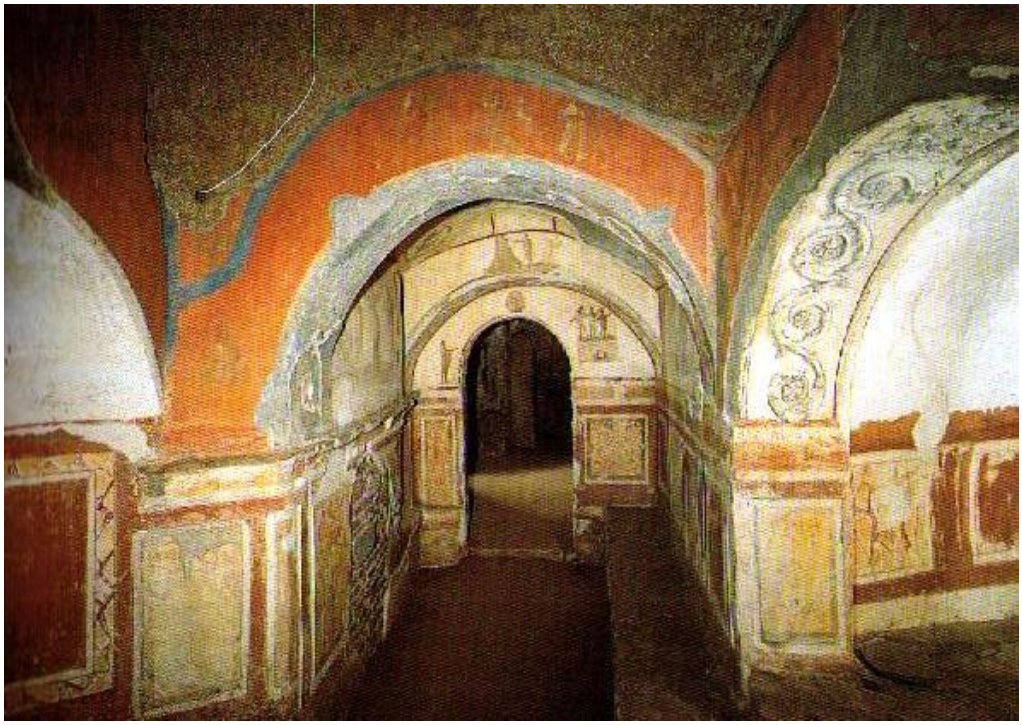

Fig. 47. The ‘Greek Chapel’ in the Catacomb of Priscilla featuring a depiction of ‘The three youths in fiery furnace’ on the right side of the archway. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 48. The Greek Chapel in the Catacomb of Priscilla featuring the painting of the ‘Adoration of the Magi’ on the central arch and the ‘Fractio Panis’ banqueting scene on the apsidal arch. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 49. Detail of the 'Fractio Panis' banqueting scene from the apsidal arch of the Greek Chapel in the Catacomb of Priscilla. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 50. Depiction of the 'Baptism of Christ' from Catacomb of Callistus. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph by Pompeo and Renato Sansaini, 1897-1903. (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 51. Damaged tomb decoration from the Catacomb of Domitilla.
(© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 52. Antonio Bosio's drawing of the damaged fresco from the Catacomb of Domitilla. (Bosio, A., (1632) *Roma Sotterranea*).

Fig. 53. Detail of sarcophagus relief carving featuring 'Adoration of the Magi' scene with 'Virgin' figure seated on a wicker chair. (Pio Christian Museum).

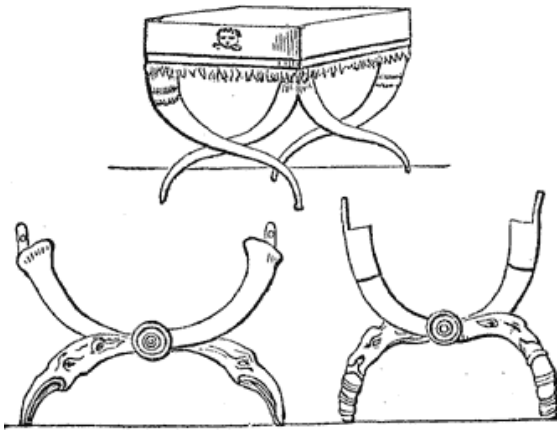

Fig. 54. Drawing of a *sella curulis* or *curule* chair. (Smith, W., (1875) *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*).

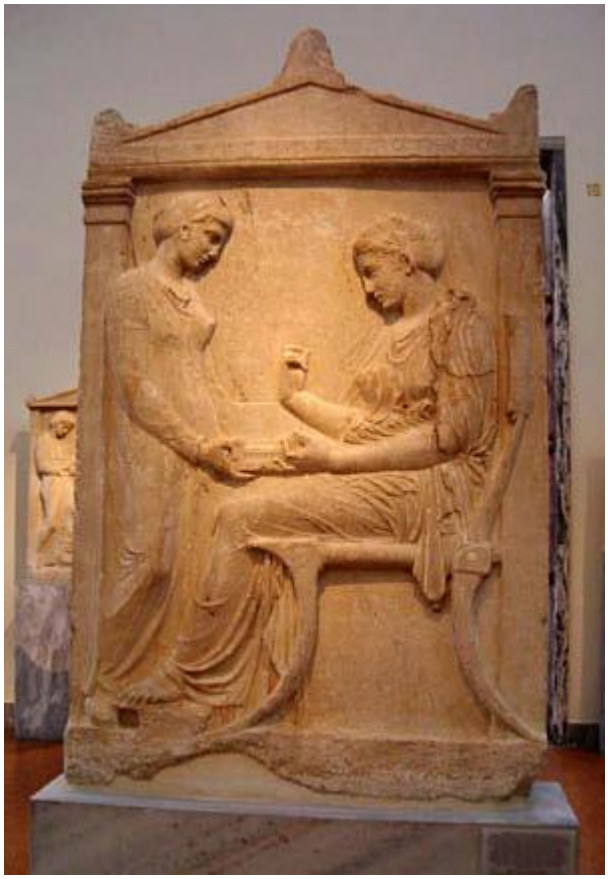

Fig. 55. Grave stele of woman identified as Hegeso. She is seated on a *klismos* attended by a servant. 5th century B.C. (Athens National Museum).

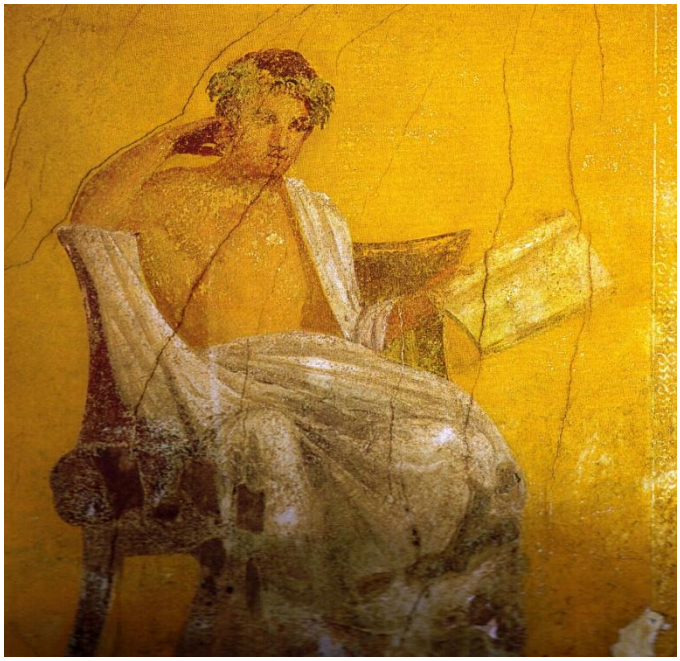

Fig. 56. Fresco of the poet Menander seated on a *klismos/cathedra*. Late first century BC. (House of Menander, Pompeii).

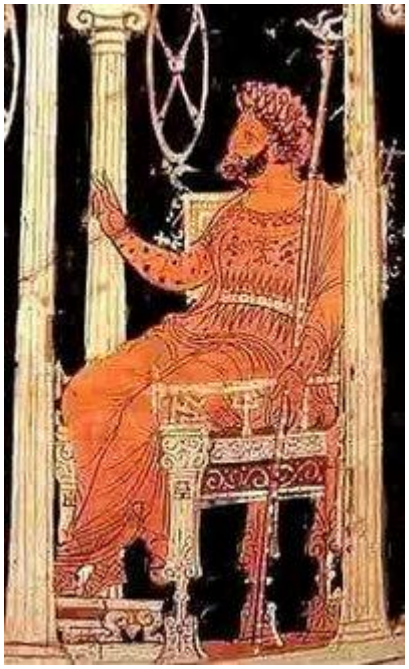

Fig. 57. The god Hades enthroned on a type of *solium*. Apulian Vase painting fourth century BC. (Museum of Antiquities, Munich).

Fig. 58. Stone tub seat from Etruscan burial chamber, sixth century BC.

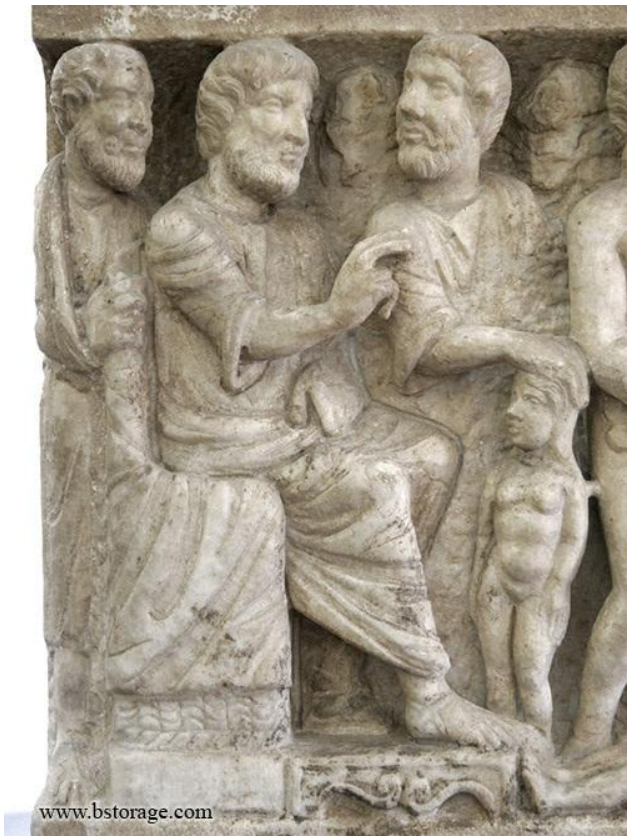

Fig. 59. Detail of sarcophagus relief carving featuring 'God creating Man and Woman'. God is seated on a draped wicker *solium*. (Pio Christian Museum).

Fig. 60. Metal bath from Herculaneum dated to the first century AD.

Fig. 61. Tub style sarcophagus. Fourth century AD. (Pio Christian Museum).

Fig. 62. Funerary relief of the wife of a potter. The dead woman is seated on a solium. (Museum of Fine Arts, Virginia, USA).

Fig. 63. The elaborately carved marble 'Trinity sarcophagus with the figure identified as God the Father creating Man and Woman on the top register and the 'Adoration of the Magi' on the bottom register. Both God and the woman and child below are seated on draped solia. (Musée de l'Arles Antique, Arles, France).

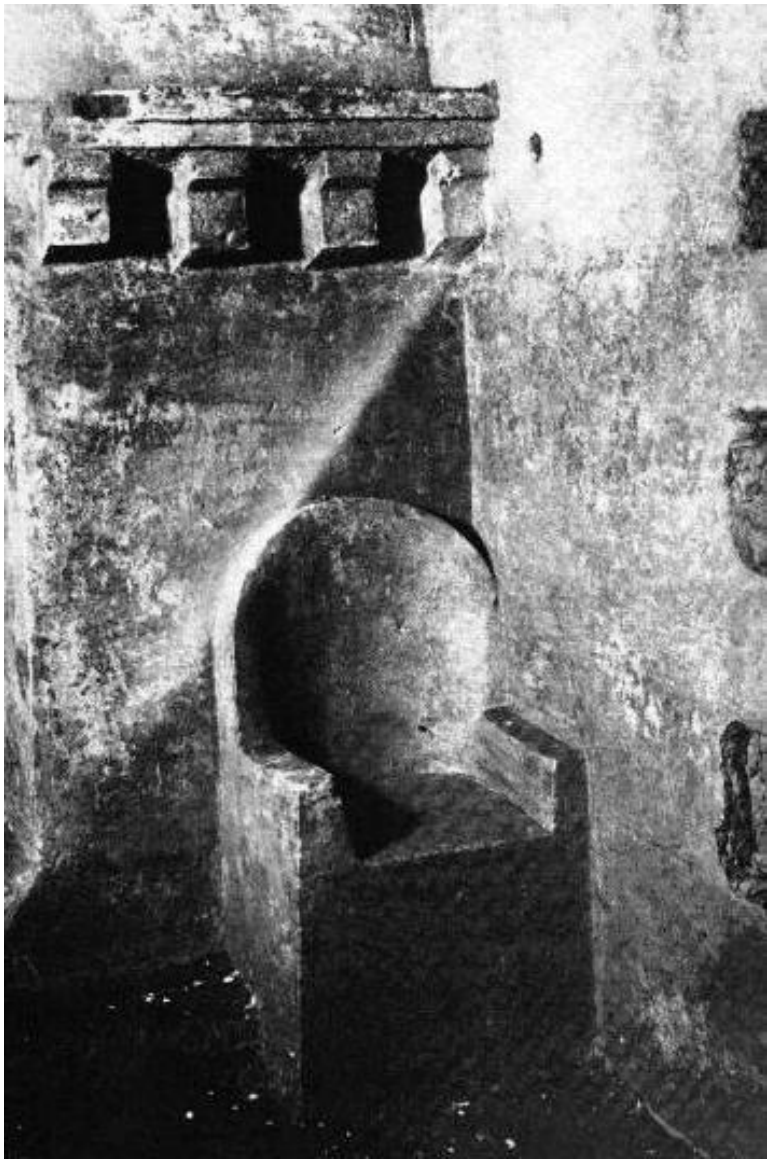

Fig. 64. Stone seat carved from tufa set into the wall of a chamber in the Coemeterium Maius Catacomb. (Stevenson, J., (1978 *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of early Christianity*).

Fig. 65. Stone seat set into the apse wall from the sixth century cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč, Croatia.

Fig. 66. Damaged ‘Seat of Moses’ from the site of a second or third century synagogue on the Island of Delos, Greece.

Fig. 67. The *Cathedra of St Peter* donated to Pope John VIII by Charles the Bald in the 9th century. (St Peter's Basilica).

Fig. 68. The elaborately carved throne of Maximianus, Bishop of Ravenna, shaped in the style of a *solium.* 547 A.D. Ivory over wood. (Archiepiscopal Museum, Ravenna).

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Fig. 70. Lid of silver reliquary casket with Christ and the apostles.
(San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan).

Fig. 71. Seated woman and child with philosophers from front panel of silver reliquary casket with Christ and the apostles. (San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan).

Fig. 72. Daniel and the Three Youths from side panel of silver reliquary casket with Christ and the apostles. (San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan).

Fig. 73. Daniel and the elders, rear panel of silver reliquary casket with Christ and the apostles. (San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan).

Fig. 74. Judgement of Solomon, side panel of silver reliquary casket with Christ and the apostles. (San Nazaro Maggiore, Milan).

Chapter Six

Fig. 75. Fresco of the martyr Petronilla guiding the dead woman Veneranda from the Catacomb of Domitilla (© Foto PCAS).

Fig. 76. Base of gilded glass vessel featuring image of married couple in gold leaf. 4th century AD. (British Museum, London).

Fig. 77. Base of gilded glass vessel with representation of St. Agnes, from Catacomb of Panfilo. (Nicolai,V.F., Bisconti, F., and Mazzoleni, D., (2002) *The Christian Catacombs of Rome*).

Fig. 78. Base of gilded glass vessel featuring veiled orante identified as Maria standing between figures of Petrus and Paulus, 4th cent.
(Ernesto Wolf Collection, Württemberg Landesmuseum, Stuttgart).

Fig. 79. Drawing of the base of gilded glass vessel featuring figure identified as Maria standing between figures of Petrus and Paulus.(Northcote, J.S., & Brownlow, W.R. (1879) *Roma Sotterranea*).

Fig. 80. Black and white photo of the base of gilded vessel featuring two female orante one identified as Maria the other Agnes. (Bologna Museo Civico). Fig 265, Morey, C.R., (Ferrari, G., ed.) (1959) *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library. With additional catalogues of other gold-glass collections*, (Città del Vaticano).

Fig. 81. Black and white photograph of base of gilded glass vessel featuring figure identified as Mara. (Vatican Library).

Fig. 82. Drawing of gold glass roundel featuring Petrus and Paulus with Peregrina. (Bosio, A., (1632) *Roma Sotterranea*).

Chapter Seven

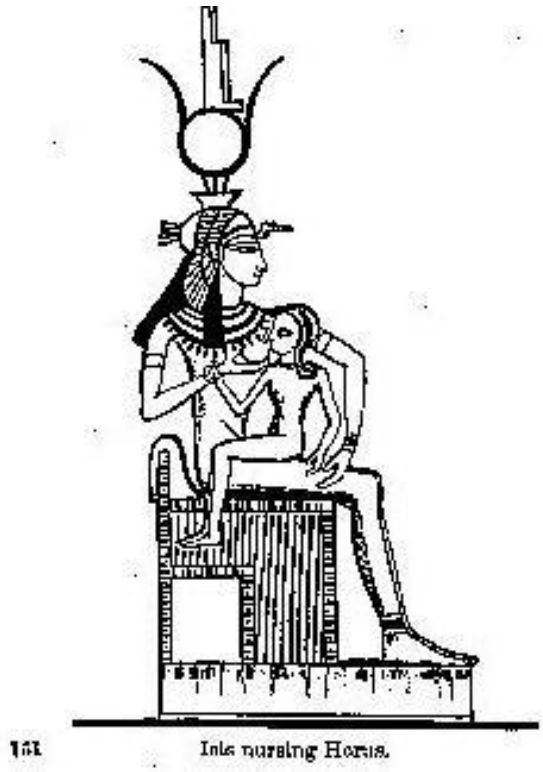

Fig. 83. Woodcut of the goddess Isis nursing Horus. (Jameson, A., (1892) *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts*).

Fig. 84. Terracotta group representing Isis nursing Horus/Harpocrates. First century BC. (British Museum, London).

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Fig. 86. Marble statue of Isis. Second century AD. (Palazzo Nuova – Capitoline Museums).

Fig. 87. Image of Isis from an antoninianus coin of Claudius II, 269-270 AD. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 88. Isis (on the left, holding a sistrum), Sarapis (wearing a modius), the child Harpocrates (holding a cornucopia) and Dionysus (holding the thyrsus). Marble relief, last quarter of the second century AD. (Louvre Museum, Paris).

Fig. 89. Panel from the *Ara Pacis Augustae* in Rome. The seated woman with the two children on her lap is said to represent Tellus Mater.

Fig. 90. Coin of Empress Fausta wife of Constantine represented nursing two imperial children 325-326 AD. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 91. Wall painting of *Galaktotrophousa* nursing Virgin from the Monastery of St Jeremiah, Saqqara, Egypt. 6th/7th century.

Fig. 92. Icon of the *Triumph of Orthodoxy* featuring a depiction of the original Hodegetria Icon in its shrine in Constantinople. The Hodegetria was destroyed during the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Egg tempera on wood about 1400. (British Museum, London).

Fig. 93. Coin of Empress Julia Domna (170-217AD). Bust of the empress on one side with the goddess Cybele enthroned on the reverse side bearing an inscription that designates the empress as 'Mother of Gods'. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 94. Roman copy of the cult statue of Artemis of Ephesus. Temple of Ephesus. (Museum of Efes, Turkey).

Fig. 95. Coin of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) with a depiction of the Goddess Ceres and her daughter Proserpina on the reverse. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 96. Boetian terracotta statuette of mother goddess with small daughter on lap c.500 BC. (Antiken Sammlung, Munich).

Fig. 97. Seated goddess 5th century BC**.** (Milns Antiquities Museum, University of Queensland).

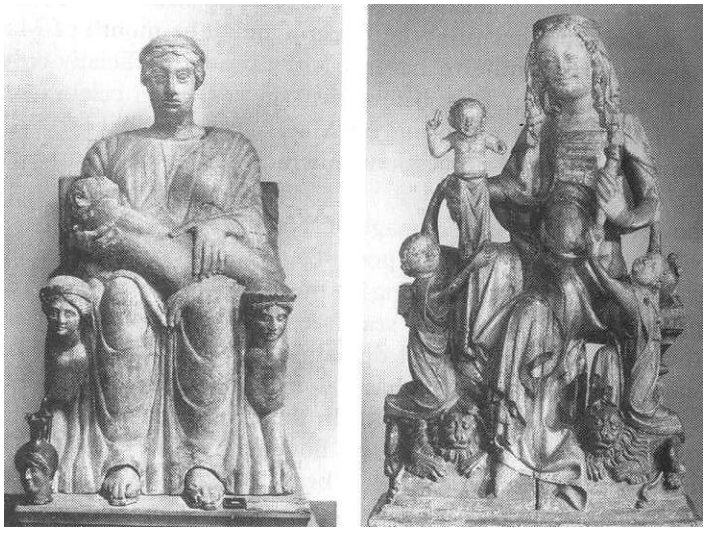

Fig. 98. Left: Mother and child cinerary urn 400 BC. (Etruscan Archeological Museum, Chianciano Terme) Right: Mary on the Lion Throne, 1360. (Hemsdorf, Germany). Examples used in Baring, A, and Cashford, J., (1993) *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*.

Fig. 99. Terracotta figurine from a child's grave found near Arles. (Musée de l'Arles**).**

Fig. 100. Denarius of Antoninus Pius (86-161AD) with figure of Annona (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 101. Bronze Coin of Constantine with figure of Felicitas 4th century AD. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 102. Coin with figure of Concordia clasping hands with the Emperor Aurelian. 270-275 AD. (Forum Ancient Coins).

Fig. 103. The triumphal arch of Septimius Severus 203AD with carving of defeated Parthians paying tribute to seated figure of Roma.

Fig. 104. Megalographic image of Roma. 4th century AD. (National Museum of Rome).

Fig. 105. Mosaic panel featuring Euteknia (boon of good children) seated between Dikaiosyne (Justice) and Philosophia (Philosophy). 3rd century AD. (Damascus Museum).

Chapter Eight

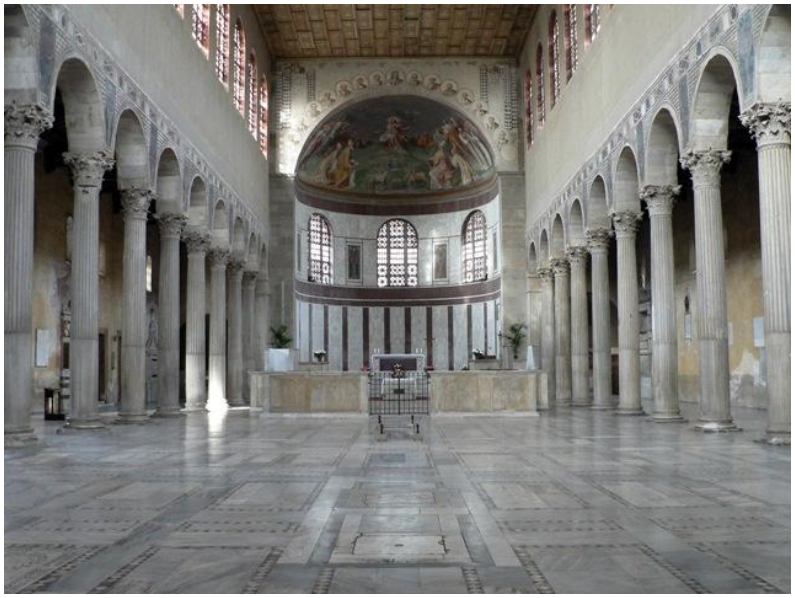

Fig. 106. Apse and triumphal arch of Santa Sabina Church, Rome.

Fig. 107. Dedicatory panel at Santa Sabina Church, Rome.

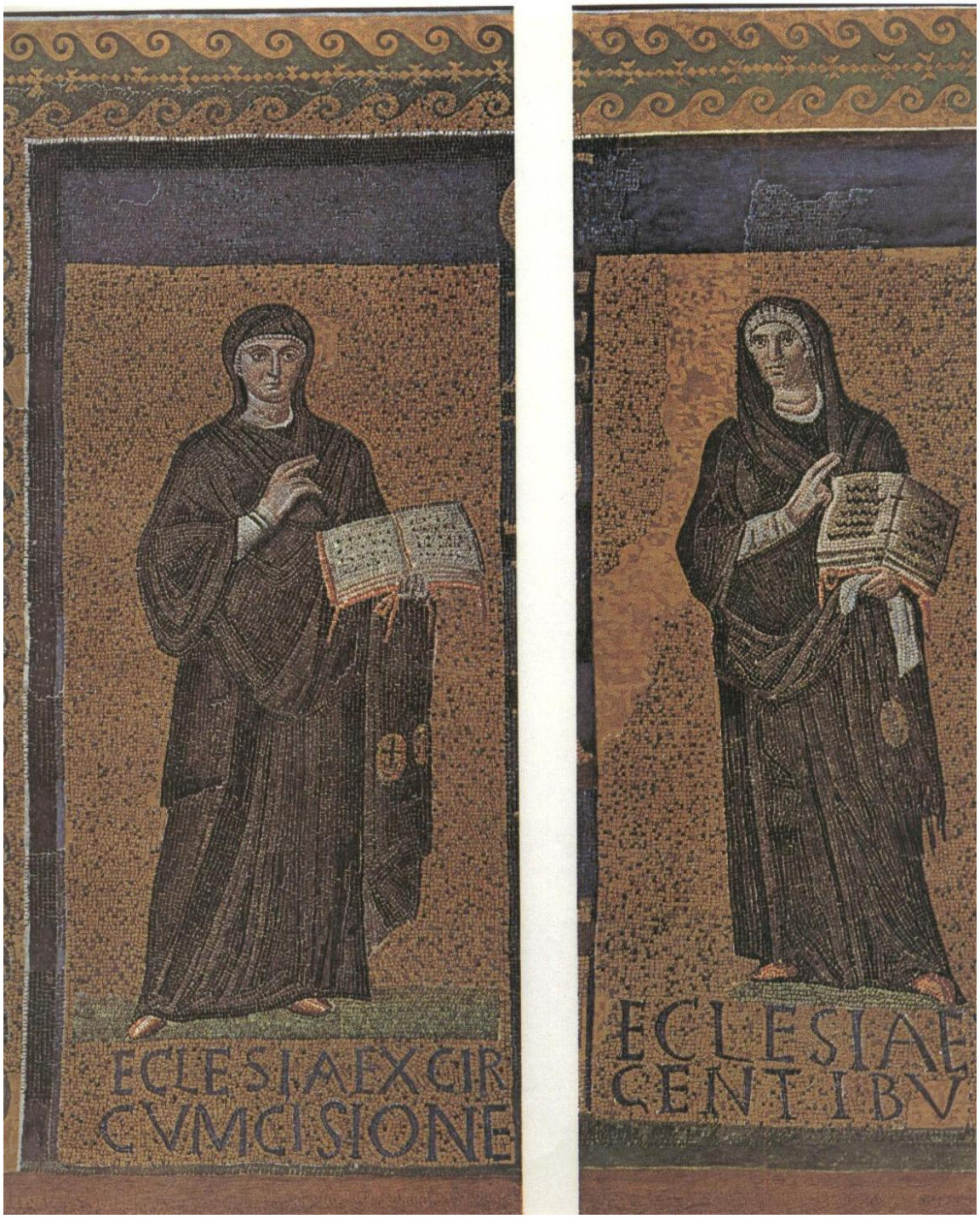

Fig. 108. Detail of figures of *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* from dedicatory panel at Santa Sabina Church.

Fig. 109. Sarcophagus fragment with veiled female figure holding open book flanked by characters from the Old and New Testament. 330-360AD. Vatican Museum.

Fig. 110. Apse mosaic in Santa Pudenziana Church, Rome.

Fig. 111. Interior of the Church of St Maria Maggiore, Rome.

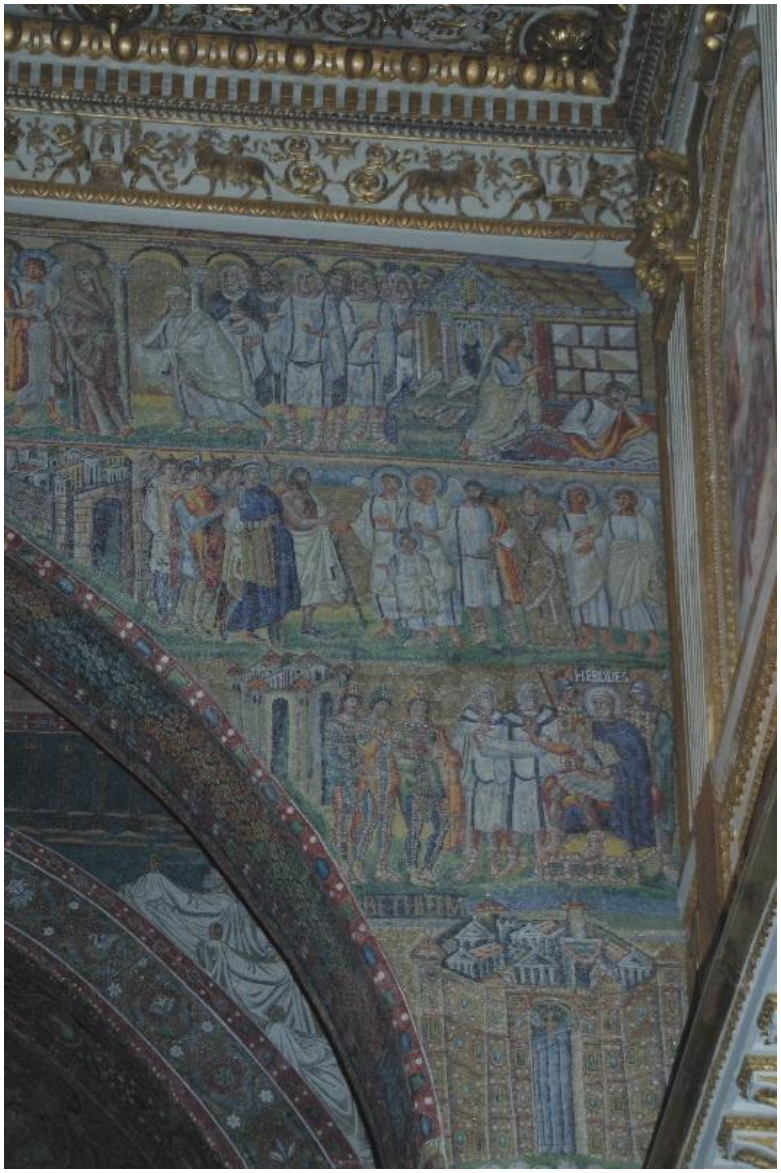

Fig 112. Restored right hand side of S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Photograph taken after cleaning of mosaics in the late 20th century.

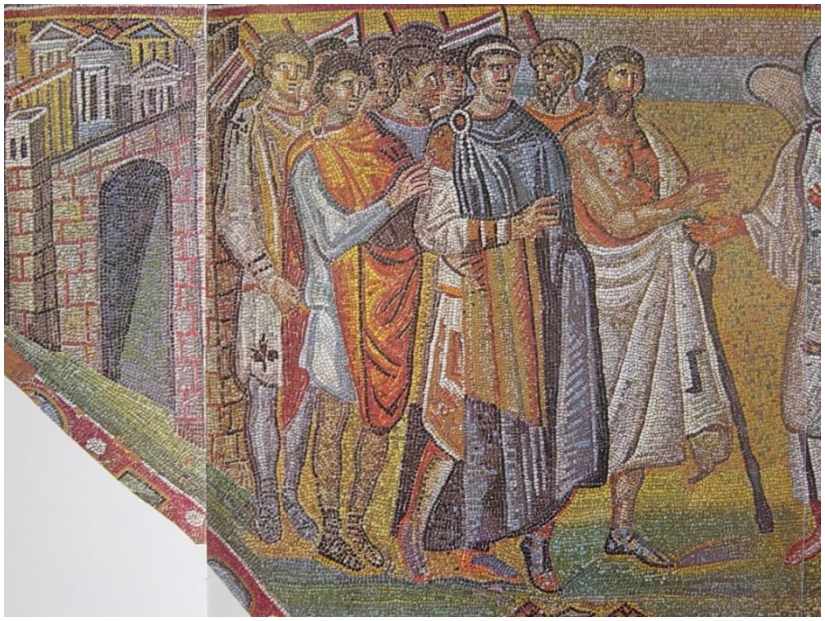

Fig. 112a

Fig. 112b

Details from scene identified as Holy Family meeting Aphrodosius the governor of Sotinen-Hermopolis in Egypt. S.Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 113. Detail from scene identified as the Annunciation. S.Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

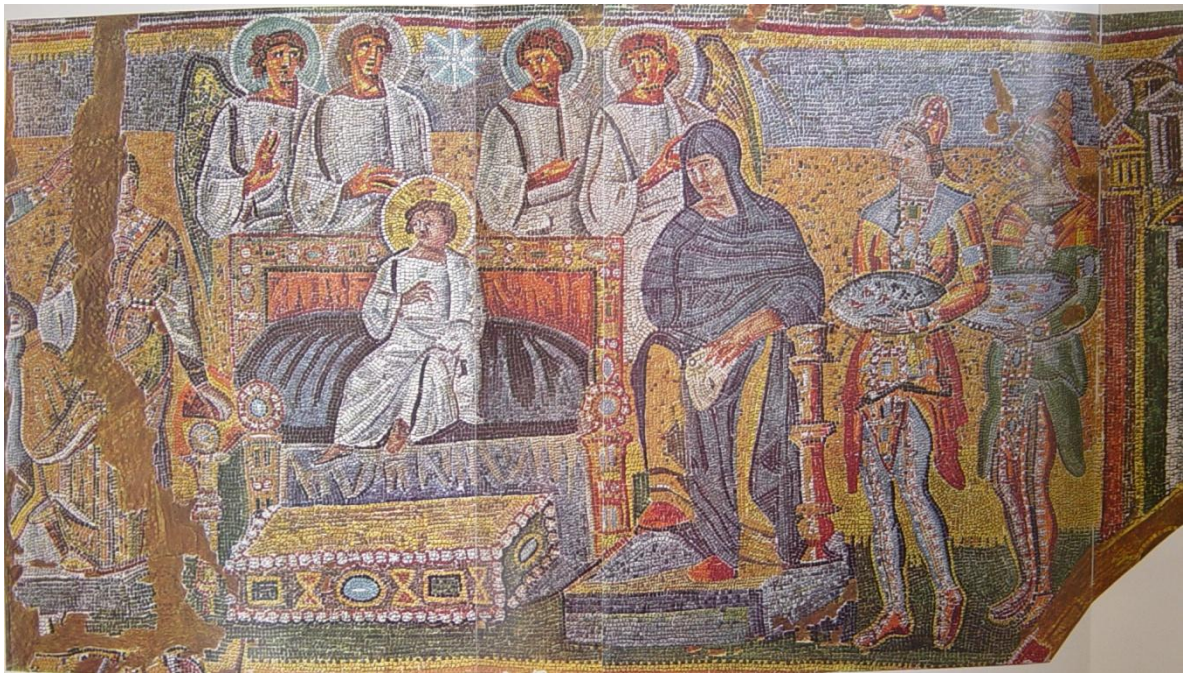

Fig. 114. Detail from scene identified as the Adoration of Magi. S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch.

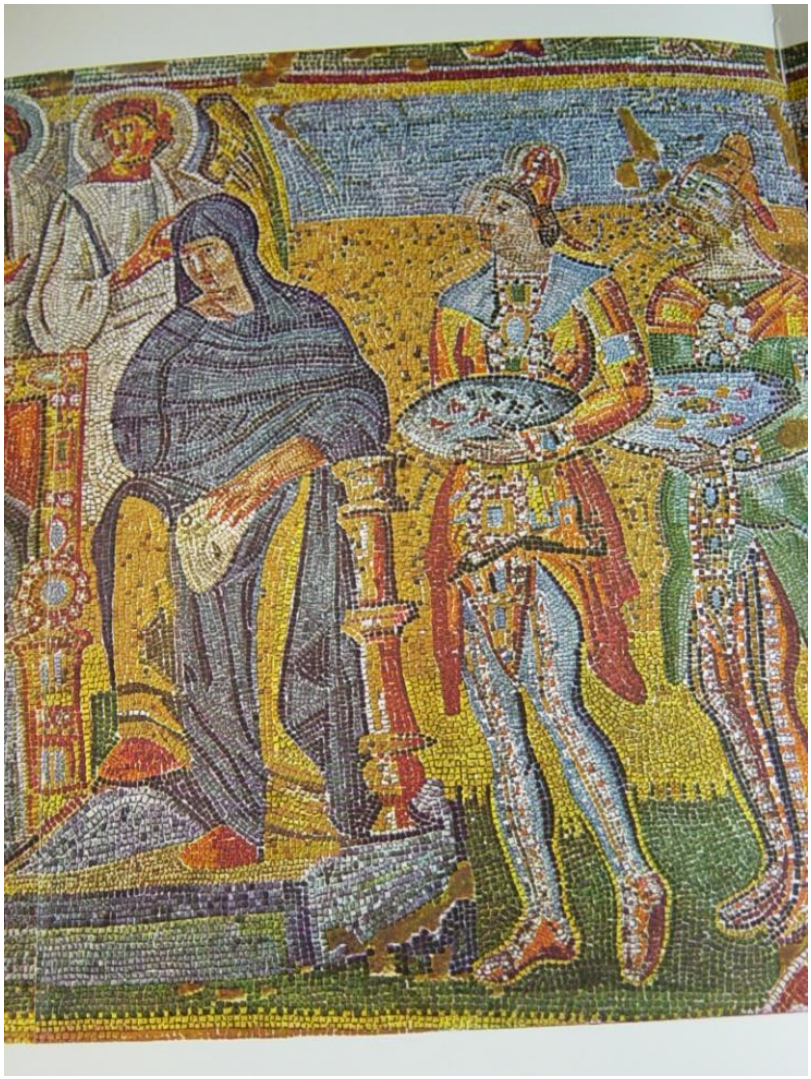

Fig. 114a. Detail of veiled woman from Adoration scene. S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

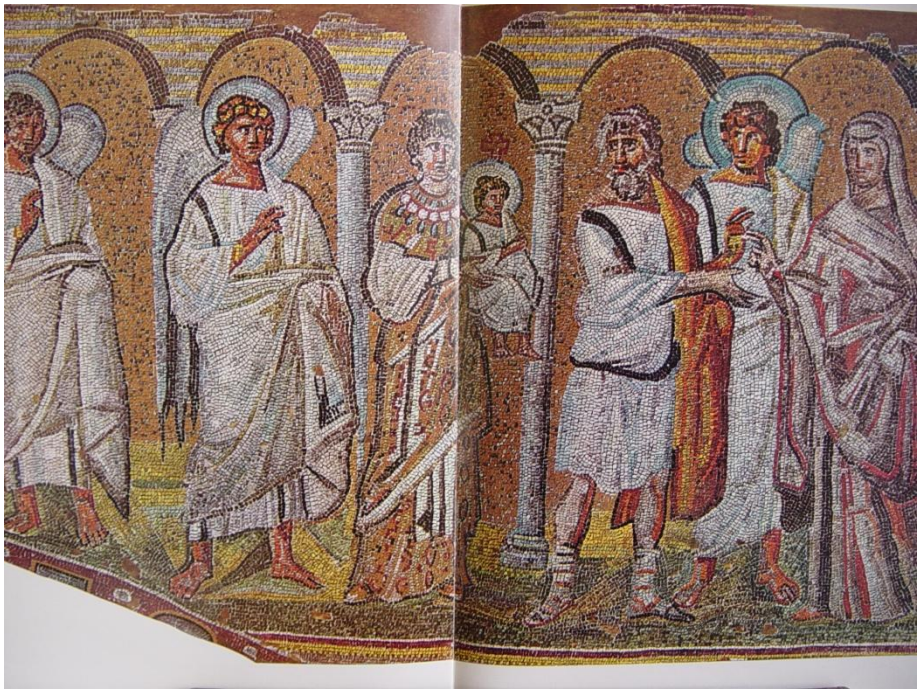

Fig. 115. Detail from scene identified as Presentation in the Temple.
S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

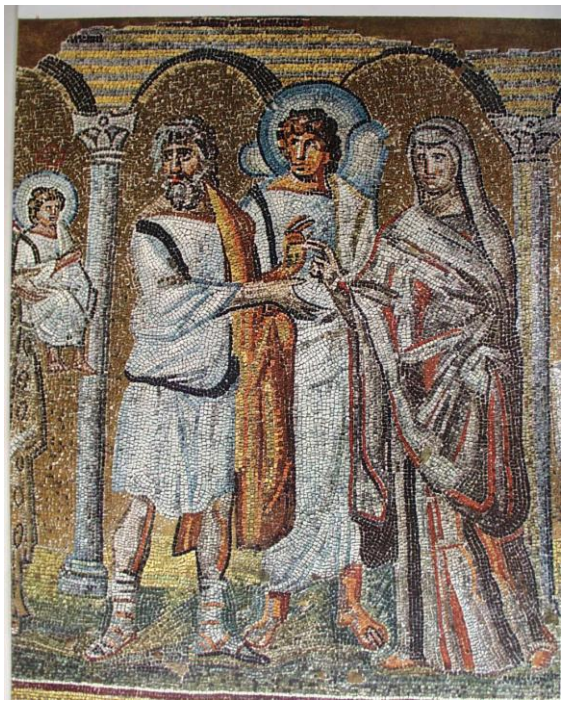

Fig. 115a. Detail of veiled woman from Presentation in the Temple.
S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch.

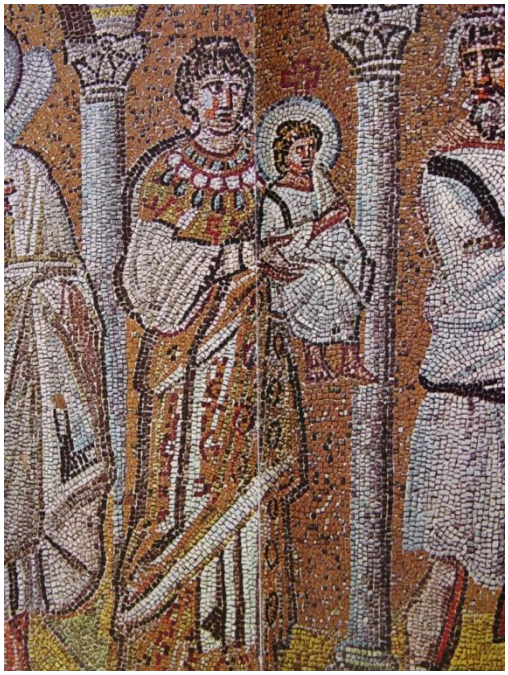

Fig 115b Detail of 'woman in gold' from the Presentation in Temple. S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 116. Portrait medallion of Licinia Eudoxia (422-462), wife of Valentinian III. (Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).

Fig. 117. Marble statue of an empress c. 386 A.D. (Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).

Fig. 118. Steelyard Weight with a Bust of a Byzantine Princess, 400–450 (Metropolitan Museum, New York).

Fig. 119. Mosaic Panel from nave of S. Maria Maggiore.
Top panel: Jacob argues with Laban having been tricked into marrying Leah;
Lower panel: Jacob married Rachel.
Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 120. Mosaic Panel from nave of S. Maria Maggiore.
Top panel: Rachel stands between Laban and Leah
Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 121. Mosaic Panel from nave of S. Maria Maggiore.
Marriage ceremony of Moses and Zipporah. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 122. Base of gilded glass vessel featuring married couple being crowned by Christ. (British Museum).

Fig. 123. Lid of the Projecta Casket with marriage portrait of Projecta and her husband. c.380. (British Museum).

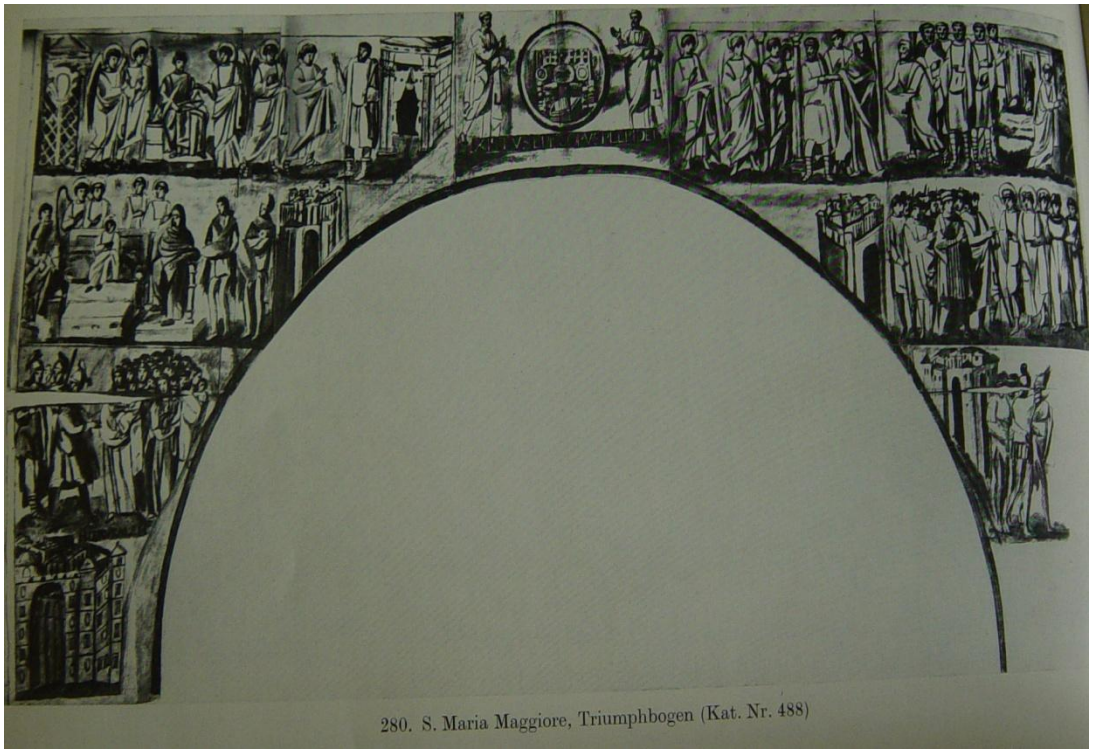

Fig. 124. Ink and wash depiction of the triumphal arch by Marco Tullio Montagna, c. 1640. (Spain S., (1979) 'The Promised Blessing: The Iconography of the Mosaics of S. Maria Maggiore' *The Art Bulletin*).

Fig. 125. Mosaic panel featuring the annunciation scene from the triumphal arch of S Maria Maggiore. Photograph taken after cleaning of mosaics in the late 20th century.

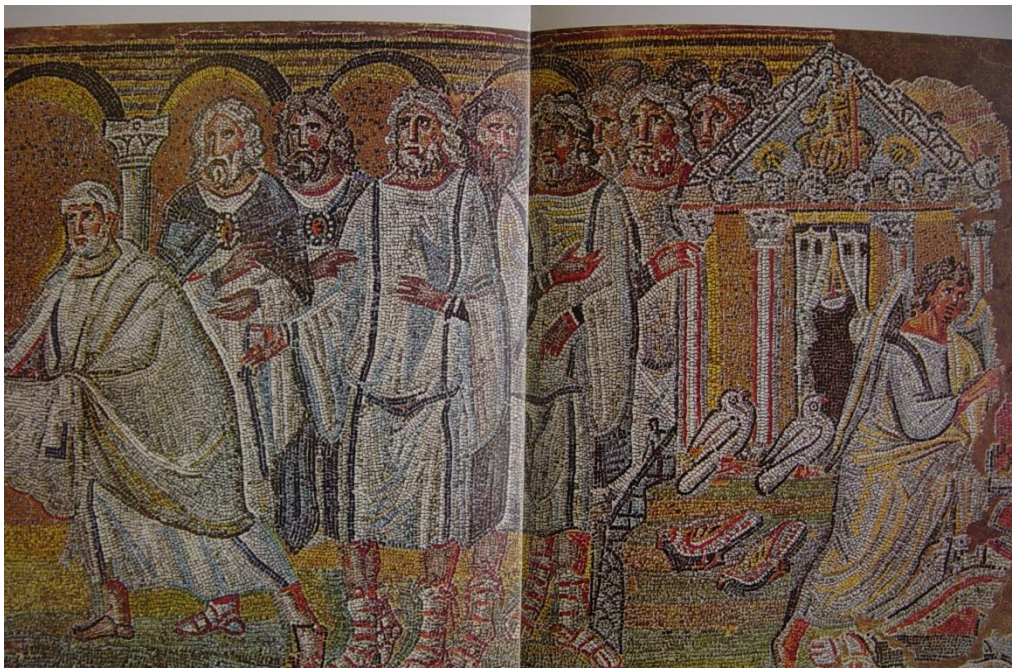

Fig. 126. Detail of the right hand side of the Presentation in the Temple scene from the triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

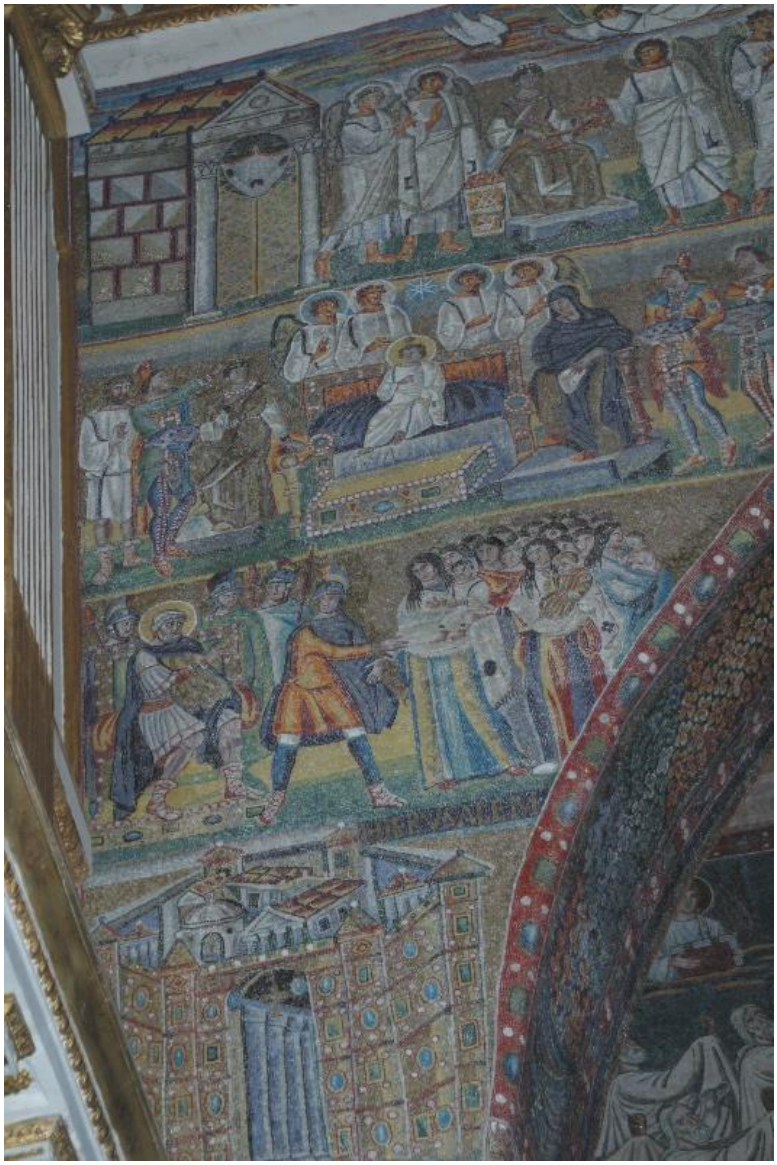

Fig 127. Left hand side of S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch. Photograph taken after cleaning of mosaics in the late 20th century.

Fig. 128. Detail of ‘massacre of the innocents’ scene from the triumphal arch of S Maria Maggiore. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 129. Detail of the three magi before Herod scene from the triumphal arch of S Maria Maggiore. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert).*

Chapter Ten

Fig. 130. Mosaic Panel from nave of S. Maria Maggiore. The young Moses being presented to the Pharaohs' daughter. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 131. Mosaic medallions of martyr saints. Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna.

Fig. 132. Detail of mosaic medallion of St. Perpetua.
Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna.

Fig. 133. Procession of female martyrs from the nave of the basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.

Fig. 134. Main apse of the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč with mosaic medallions of martyr saints. (Terry, A., & Maguire, H., (2007) *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*).

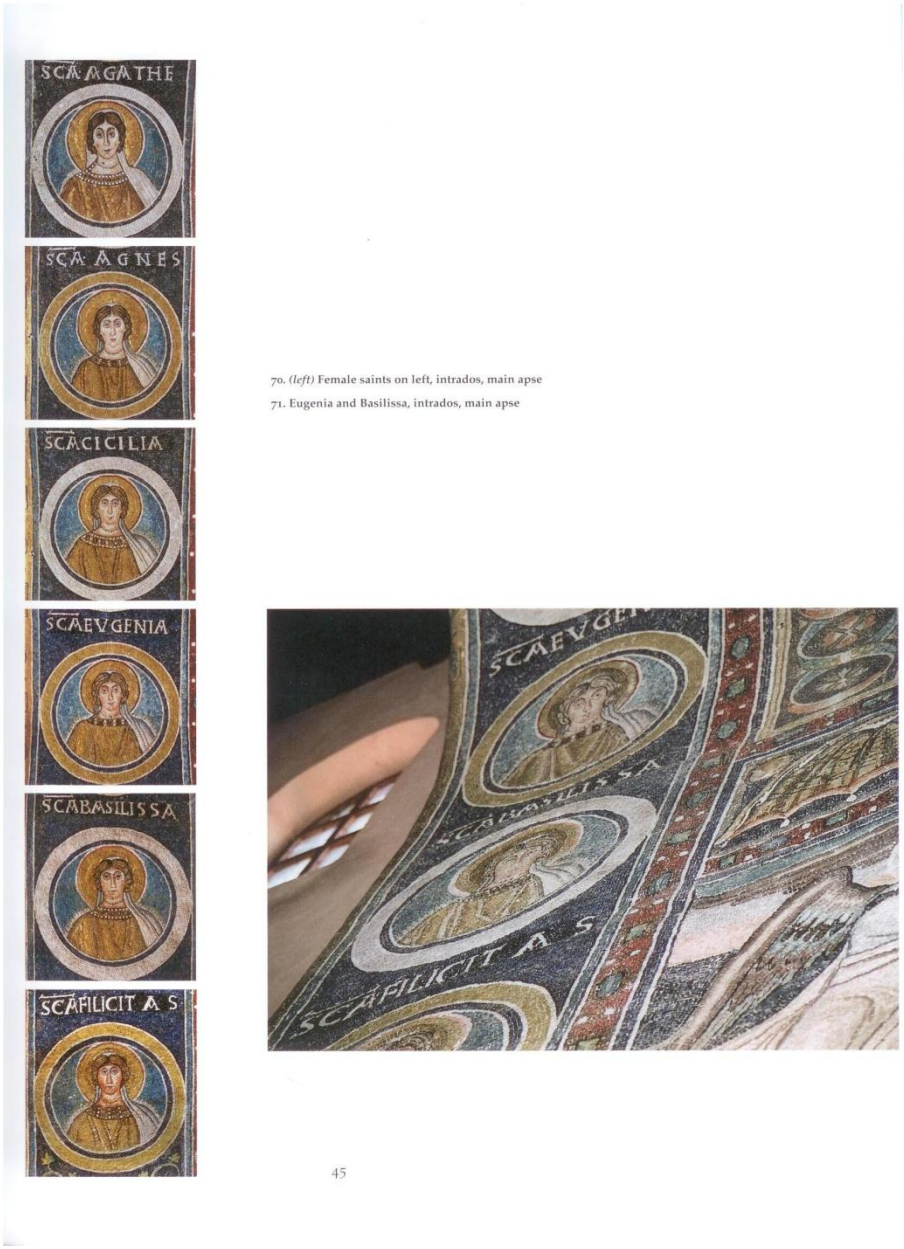

Fig. 135. Detail of mosaic medallions of martyr saints. Apse of the cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč. (Terry, A., & Maguire, H., (2007) *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*).

84. *(left)* Female saints on right, intrados, main apse
85. *(above)* Eufymia, intrados, main apse

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Fig. 136. Mosaic medallions of martyr saints with detail of St. Euphemia. Apse of the cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč. (Terry, A., & Maguire, H., (2007) *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrasius at Poreč*).

Fig. 137. Mosaic medallion of St. Felicitas. Archbishop's Chapel, Ravenna.

Fig. 138. Mosaic panel featuring the New Testament story of the Widow's mite from the nave of S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.

Fig. 139. The procession of female martyrs and three magi towards the enthroned Virgin and Child from S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna.

Fig. 140. The enthroned Virgin and Child flanked by a double guard of angels from the nave mosaics of S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna

Fig. 141. Triumphal arch from S. Maria Maggiore with *Etimasia* on the apex of the arch.

Fig. 142. Detail of *Etimasia* from the triumphal arch of S Maria Maggiore. Watercolour by Carlo Tabanelli over photograph of the mosaic. (Wilpert, J., (1916) *Die Römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten, vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*).

Fig. 143. Commemorative fresco for the widow Turtura in the Catacomb of Comodilla c. 530. The dead woman is being presented to the Virgin and Child by the saints Felix and Adauctus. (© Foto PCAS)